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CINEMAS LIKE ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE ARE BANKING ON A MOVIEGOING REVIVAL AFTER A DEVASTATING YEAR

By Brent Lang and Rebecca Rubin

BACK

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BEST PERFORMANCE RIZ AHMED



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NOMINATIONS

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RIZ AHMED

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THE TRUEST, SHREWDEST
SUPPORTING PERFORMANCES
OF 2020"**

Chicago Tribune



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JOHN DES JARDIN

TAMARA KENT

ANNE KOLBE

HONORED TO BE IN LEAGUE
WITH YOU AGAIN



ZACK SNYDER'S
JUSTICE LEAGUE

weta
DIGITAL

FEATURES

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Return Ticket

Struggling theater chains like Alamo Drafthouse are hoping audiences flock back to the movies as pandemic restrictions ease

By Brent Lang and Rebecca Rubin

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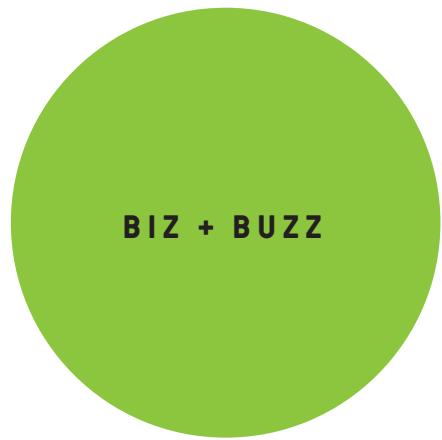
News on Demand

With the explosion of streaming, media companies are working to expand their news offerings

By Brian Steinberg



A gallery wall inside the Alamo Drafthouse's San Francisco location (also shown on the cover) chronicles the many lives of the building, which started out as the New Mission Theater in the early 1900s.



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After delays due to the pandemic, the Santa Barbara Film Festival will open on March 31 with doc "Invisible Harvest" in a drive-in event.

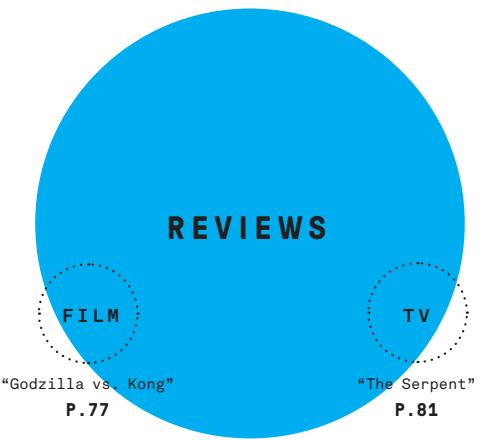
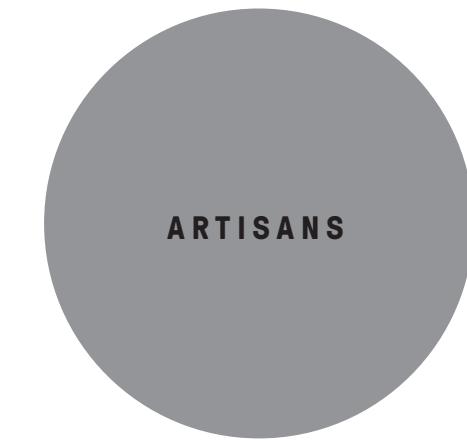


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Nasim
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"EXCELLENT...MAKES A CONVINCING CASE

SHINES A SPOTLIGHT ON ONE OF THE DARKEST CORNERS
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THE DAILY BEAST

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A DEEP DIVE INTO CONSPIRACY CULTURE"

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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION



Oscar Producers Try to Navigate the Unpredictable



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Claudia Eller

I know this is an obvious understatement, but what a wacky, messy awards season this has been! Of course it's a logistical nightmare to try to produce a great and safe awards show during these pandemic-restricted times. I really do feel for all of those attempting to do just that.

We'll see how this Sunday's oddball one-hour SAG Awards ceremony pans out, but plans to inform all of the winners four days ahead of the broadcast could prove to be a total PR disaster if — or dare I say when — that intel leaks to the press.

As far as the Oscars are concerned, our Just for Variety editor Marc Malkin reported this week that in a Zoom call with studio and personal publicists of the nominees, show producer Steven Soderbergh referred to the logistics of organizing this year's ceremony as "mind-numbing."

It hasn't helped the matter that the Oscar producers and the Motion Picture Academy have refused to provide any real clarity on the details of what the April 25 ceremony will look like.

"After weeks of speculation and leaks, it will be great to know how the show finally comes together creatively," Malkin tells me.

On the March 30 call, Soderbergh and co-producer Stacey Sher begged for forgiveness for all of the confusion and promised they were working hard to figure everything out. "We're sorry for the frustration our silence has caused," Soderbergh told the talent reps. "It's not because we don't care. It's not because we aren't listening or that we've been caught off guard by the complexities of the show," he said, explaining that every day since the nominations were announced "we've had an internal debate on whether to release information

about what we're doing even though that information is often etched in Jell-O."

It seems to me that there's still somewhat of an open question about the use or nonuse of Zoom on the broadcast. In a March 18 letter to nominees, the producers said they intended to forgo Zoom options for those unable to attend the ceremony. That decision was met with some serious backlash from foreign nominees and those filming projects in other countries. On the March 30 call, the producers reiterated that they will try to avoid using Zoom to preserve the picture and sound quality, but seemed to leave open the possibility that they may have to resort to it in some cases. They explained that for those unable to travel due to international COVID restrictions, the show would include a London venue for nominees to gather and participate in the ceremony, while others would be invited to participate via satellite from local broadcast affiliates.

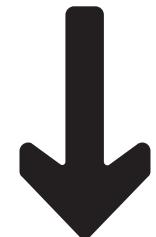
Also unclear is whether the producers will issue a mask mandate for seated nominees. So far, their reps are being told that their clients should simply bring a mask with them. So does that mean that everybody should just ignore what the medical experts and President Biden are telling us that, vaccinated or not, we should still wear masks in public settings?

And, finally, other than COVID having directly impacted the production of awards shows this year, I sincerely hope that the Oscars will at least acknowledge how this deadly virus has affected the world at large.

"While it's Hollywood's biggest night of the year, nobody should lose sight of the fact that we're still in the midst of the pandemic," Malkin says, "and there should be some recognition in the show beyond the celebratory aspects." 

I sincerely hope that the Oscars will at least acknowledge how this deadly virus has affected the world at large."

Stars
of
Upcoming
TV
Premieres



Aldis Hodge
City on a Hill
Vscore = 81
Playing Jim Brown boosted his number; now it's back to court.



Christopher Meloni
Law & Order: Organized Crime
Vscode = 65
His score is up as he embarks on a new "L&O" spinoff.



Melissa Benoist
Supergirl
Vscode = 64
Her Vscode isn't bulletproof, but it's on the rise.



Cristin Milioti
Made for Love
Vscode = 64
Her buzz is tracking well in advance of this new HBO Max series.

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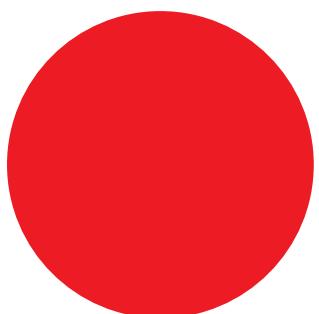
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BIZ + BUZZ



Uh-Oh! Best Pic Nominees Lack Audience

This year's lineup of under-the-radar movies could mean a big viewership dip for the Academy Awards



When this year's Oscars best picture envelope is opened, viewers might not be on the edge of their seat to see if "Nomadland," "Mank" or "Promising Young Woman" — or another contender — is named. Instead, they might be scratching their heads. Although the pandemic has left households paying for more streaming services than ever, the majority of the best picture nominees at the Oscars are unknown to entertainment consumers. Over the years, this has been a recurring problem for the Oscars, which one reason why, in 2010, the Academy expanded the best picture race to up to 10 nominees to allow for more populist titles to enter the mix.

But this year's lack of awareness comes with a perplexing twist. Since the



From top:
"Promising Young Woman," starring Carey Mulligan, and "Minari," toppling Steven Yeun, have gotten love from critics and Oscar voters, but much of the public isn't aware of the films.

pandemic has shut down most movie theaters, the majority of the best picture Oscar contenders — including "Sound of Metal," "The Trial of the Chicago 7" and "Minari" — are currently available to rent or stream on Netflix, Amazon and other platforms. But most of the general public has steered clear of these films, even though people are spending more time at home than ever and starved for new content. After the best picture nominees were announced, industry researcher Guts + Data surveyed 1,500 active entertainment consumers — moviegoers, transactional home entertainment consumers and streaming consumers — to gauge their awareness of the films, using the title, stars and poster as prompts. More specifically, "awareness" was gauged by a binary "heard of"/"not heard of" option when presented with basic marque facts, such as "The Father" starring Anthony Hopkins, Olivia Colman and Mark Gatiss.

According to the survey, the most known best picture nominee was "Judas and the Black Messiah," the HBO Max drama about Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton, with just over 46% awareness. Netflix's "The Trial of the Chicago 7" was second with 39% awareness, followed by Searchlight Pictures' "Nomadland" with 35% awareness. Less than a quarter of those surveyed were familiar with

Amazon Studios' "The Sound of Metal" (23% awareness) and the Hollywood valentine "Mank" (18%), also on Netflix. (See chart.)

The disconnect could spell trouble for ABC, which is broadcasting the Oscar ceremony on April 25. In modern times, Oscar ratings have been bigger when the movies in contention are well-known. In 1998, a whopping 57 million viewers tuned in to watch "Titanic" sweep the show, picking up 11 statuettes — with director James Cameron declaring himself the "king of the world."

But the 2021 ceremony, which awarded "Parasite" the top prize, dipped to an all-time-low viewership of 23.6 million viewers. That was at least better than this year's Golden Globes, which netted a dismal 6.9 million viewers, down sharply from 18.3 million viewers in 2021.

Other films released during quarantine fared slightly better due to name recognition on their opening weekend, such as the sequel "Bill & Ted Face the Music" (50% awareness), the "X-Men" spinoff "The New Mutants" (43% awareness) and Christopher Nolan's big budget "Tenet" (46% awareness).

Greg Durkin, the founder and CEO of Guts + Data and former Warner Bros. senior VP of marketing analytics, also broke down the broader discrepancy

between theatrical releases and SVOD-only titles in 2021.

The average wide theatrical release this year (with 1,200-plus locations upon release) showed an awareness of 44% in the week immediately after release among all U.S. entertainment consumers. Cartoon reboot "Tom & Jerry" had the highest awareness at 88%, while indie drama "Boogie" had the lowest (26%) at one week after release.

The average SVOD-only title released this year showed awareness of 32% in the week immediately after release. The Eddie Murphy sequel "Coming 2 America" had the highest awareness at 75%, while the Woody Allen-Mia Farrow HBO docu-series "Allen v. Farrow" had the lowest (13%) at one week after release.

Beyond the lack of consumer awareness, there are other hurdles for the Oscar telecast this year, including a mandate that nominees must show up in person, causing concern among executives, publicists and talent who are still cautious about the pandemic.

Despite the challenges, this year's nominees are the most diverse class ever, with 70 women receiving a total of 76 nominations, and nine of the 20 acting nominations going to people of color. For more data and analysis, visit Variety Intelligence Platform. 

TOP FILMS LOW ON BUZZ

Audience awareness of best picture nominees

Mank

18%

Sound of Metal

23%

The Father

24%

Minari

24%

Promising Young Woman

34%

Nomadland

35%

The Trial of the Chicago 7

39%

Judas and the Black Messiah

46%

Source: Guts + Data

Daniel Kaluuya in "Judas and the Black Messiah"





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“SWIFT AND
SHATTERING.”

Los Angeles Times

“DEEPLY COMPELLING
AND HEARTBREAKING.”

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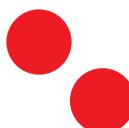
A FILM BY JASMILA ŽBANIĆ

QUO VADIS, AIDA?

super

Here 'You' Come Again

By Matt Donnelly



"I love the obsessive mind, and I've always been an obsessive person," says author Caroline Kepnes, whose talent for the all-consuming has benefited book publishers and Hollywood showrunners alike for the past seven years.

In 2014, Kepnes published the thriller "You," introducing readers to Joe Goldberg, a bookish heartthrob whose highbrow taste and social media know-how made him a dream lover for unsuspecting women — before he eventually revealed himself as a serial killer. A thoroughly modern antihero, portrayed by Penn Badgley on the Netflix original series based on Kepnes' books, the character of Goldberg is a dangerous and charismatic mirror to our Instagram-crafted identities.

Following the publication of the first two books in the series, "You" and "Hidden Bodies," Random House announced in 2019 that there would be two more installments, which will diverge from the narrative on the Netflix show, produced by Greg Berlanti and showrunner Sera Gamble. The first one up is "You Love Me," which comes out April 6 and (mild spoilers ahead) sees Goldberg released from prison and starting anew on the Pacific Northwest hamlet of Bainbridge Island.

"I left readers hanging in 2016," Kepnes says. "I left this character locked up and anticipating so much. I've been dying to do this for the readers for a long time. I wanted a break in between, and I wanted

people to sit with where he was. We find him in this new life, walking into a library, and there is a woman librarian. That was what was really exciting for this book, to see him tangle with someone who is a responsible, grounded adult."

Kepnes, who has written for TV series including "7th Heaven" and "The Secret Life of the American Teenager," has a devout showbiz following that includes Lena Dunham and Stephen King. She also heavily references great works of pop culture: Goldberg's own obsessions run from the films of Mike Nichols to the quaint "Cedar Cove" book series by Debbie Macomber. Kepnes says this lends a sense of comfort to a plot full of dark turns.

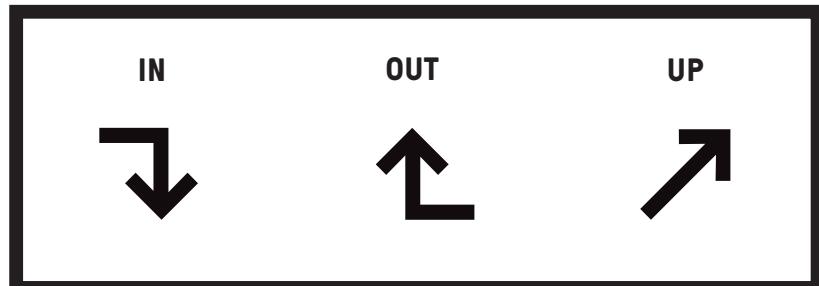
"I do love extremes," she says. "I love when something is so well defined in its own special way. When you're in '7th Heaven,' you know that no one is going to swear. When you're with Joe Goldberg, you know that eventually something is going to send him off the deep end. Being inside of his mind, in a way, helps you map your own — what we say and don't say, who we are and pretend to be."

While Joe is continually struggling with a larger sense of belonging, Kepnes says her new novel will be especially resonant in a pandemic-stricken world.

"None of us are our best social selves right now, and in that way social media is so prescient and maybe deceptive," she says. "In the book, Joe uses social media in an antisocial way, but he is also using it to look for happiness and love. It's interesting for me to write, because he's trying so bad to be a part of things. He doesn't have that one person to text. It's that stark loneliness that's amplified by him being exposed to the life in our feeds."



"You Love Me" sees the return of Joe Goldberg; Victoria Pedretti and Penn Badgley star in Netflix's "You."



Deena Sanjana Beach
has joined Adult Swim as VP of marketing. She was previously VP of marketing for Freeform.



Keri Putnam
is resigning as Sundance Institute CEO after a decade in the post. The institute is mounting a search for her successor.



Monica Rodman
has been promoted to executive VP of development for Universal Television Alternative Studio. She's been with the studio since 2015.

Nick Pepper
has moved to Amazon Studios as head of creative content. He came from Legendary, where he was head of TV and digital studios.

Alison Finlay
has been tapped executive VP and chief operating officer of Motown Records. She had been senior VP of business affairs for Universal Music Group.

Sarah Asante
has left her post as a commissioning editor at the BBC to join UKTV as head of scripted comedy. She'd been with BBC since 2015.

Wang Zhongjun
has stepped down as executive chairman and exec director of Huayi Tencent Entertainment. He was a co-founder of the Chinese media giant.

Jamie Morris
has advanced to director of programs for Sky. He joined the satcaster in 2014, and had worked at BBC Three before that.

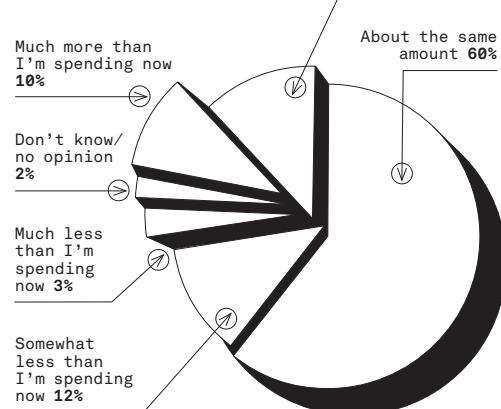
Adam Starr
has been upped to senior VP of marketing for Virgin Music Label and Marketing Services. He had been head of marketing for Virgin Music.

STREAMING'S STEP CHANGE

COVID quarantines will have a lasting effect on consumer media-consumption habits. In March 2021, the volume of traffic to streaming services was 21% above pre-pandemic levels on average, according to Verizon network data. Most Americans say their elevated binge-watching will continue through next year — and 22% expect to be streaming even more. —Todd Spangler

Note: Total does not add up to 100% because of rounding

A year from now, how do you anticipate your time spent watching content through a streaming service will change?



Source: Verizon/Morning Consult March 12-14 poll of 3,000 U.S. adults

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**A PROFILE OF PEOPLE WHO DECLARED
THEY WOULD NO LONGER BE INVISIBLE."**

NEW YORK

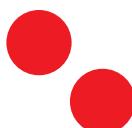




The game show's updated obstacle course still features massive red balls.

A Bigger, Bolder, Ballsier 'Wipeout'

By Michael Schneider



When "Wipeout" creator Matt Kunitz began planning the show's revival for TBS, he knew one element had to return: those iconic large red balls. Everything else could be updated — and has been, from new hosts John Cena and Nicole Byer to a revised game play that now features teams of two.

"Our marching orders were to make it bigger, bolder, edgier," Kunitz says of the show, which returns April 1. But bigger and bolder in the time of COVID-19 meant a major undertaking for the new "Wipeout." Another safety issue it faced in its return was the death of a 38-year-old contestant during taping last year.

Nonetheless, the escapist nature of "Wipeout" seemed ripe for return in these uncertain times. It was Corie Henson, head of unscripted for TBS, TNT and TruTV, who first inquired about reviving the show when she arrived at Turner in late 2019.

"I was looking for big, broad formats, and I wanted a legacy franchise that I could bring back," Henson says. "Creatively, we felt like there was a way to update the format."

The original "Wipeout" launched on ABC in 2008 (and ran until 2014), in the midst of the economic crisis, and became the kind of feel-good program that viewers were looking for.

"Wipeout" 2.0 comes as audiences are in the midst of a global pandemic and

also presumably looking for merriment. Providing those laughs are WWE star and actor Cena and "Nailed It" host and comedian Byer, who tosses in plenty of blue gags while still keeping it family-friendly as contestants try to navigate the show's extremely difficult obstacle course. "It took us a while to dial in how far we could take it," says Henson. "But John Cena plays an amazing straight man to her sort of bad girl, and she does it all with such an innocence in her delivery."

Also new to the mix is sideline reporter Camille Kostek. But much of the production team remains the same, led by Kunitz, who is based at Lionsgate under an overall deal — but had negotiated the ability to still do "Wipeout" (which is produced by Endemol Shine North America) should it be brought back. "I would say it's the most important show of my career," he says. "It would be heartbreaking if I wasn't able to come back and produce the show again."

The pandemic presented unique challenges to producing "Wipeout," however. Adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols ballooned the show's budget by 25%, which translated to several million dollars more in costs.

Safety took on another meaning when a contestant died during taping last fall. A coroner's report found that he had had a heart attack and had suffered from undetected coronary artery disease.

"It was devastating, not just for obvious reasons but for the family and for the family of people on set," Henson says. "In that moment we decided to continue on with the show, but obviously with a heightened sense of awareness of the sensitivities around what had happened."

“

IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT SHOW OF MY CAREER. IT WOULD BE HEARTBREAKING IF I WASN'T ABLE TO COME BACK AND PRODUCE THE SHOW AGAIN.” — MATT KUNITZ, “WIPEOUT” CREATOR

'Made for Love' Brings 'Female Lens' to Sci-Fi

By Elaine Low



In adapting her sci-fi novel "Made for Love" for television, author Alissa Nutting worked with showrunner Christina Lee to bring to the screen some fantastical elements, such as simulated beaches so convincing that they're indistinguishable from the real thing.

But the crux of the story is an analog one: an examination of who you are when you're in a relationship — and who you are when no one else is watching.

The HBO Max series, from Paramount Television, centers on Cristin Milioti as Hazel Green, a woman who discovers that her controlling tech billionaire husband, Byron Gogol (Billy Magnussen), has implanted a chip in her brain that tracks her whereabouts and her emotions. The technology visualized on-screen seems at once futuristic — the Gogol complex is a series of virtual reality cubical hubs, and Byron can see everything Hazel sees through the chip in her brain — and yet not quite so far off in an age of smart speakers and remote workplaces.

"We wanted to tell a sci-fi story through a female lens," Lee says. "I think the big difference there with what that means, 'using a female lens,' is that while the sci-fi aspect of it is the backdrop and is what's exciting about it, ultimately what this show is about is relationships and a woman's journey in finding her identity and exploring intimacy. Those were the kinds of things that we really wanted to dig into."

The novel was heavily centered on Hazel's perspective, but the TV adaptation had to get out of her head — a little ironic, given that the implanted chip allows a direct view into her brain. While the eccentric, domineering Byron is mostly seen through flashback in the book, his character is brought to the forefront for the series, a decision meant to add complexity to his villainy.

"So much of the show is really peeling back the layers between public appearance and even persona within relationships," Nutting says. "Hazel and Byron are

two people who are [each] really pretending to be someone that they aren't, even when they're alone with one another."

In developing the series, Lee and Nutting shaped a narrative around the ways that modern technology can seem like an answer to loneliness, albeit an imperfect one. That their protagonist feels not just trapped in her marriage but literally trapped in her luxurious, AI-powered home seemed prescient, as the production filmed some of its episodes in the midst of the pandemic.

"Byron's whole thing is that a simulation can be just as good, or that if you have a simulated experience, you have no need for the real thing," Nutting says. "And that came to mean something different, I think, for all of us, post-lockdown."

After being forced to pause filming in March 2020, production picked back up in mid-October in Los Angeles. Nutting was "blissed out" to see the cast and crew, underscoring the importance of human connection.

"It really, I think, solidified this theme [that] there are some things that there just is not a psychological, artificial supplement for," she says. 

Cristin Milioti stars in "Made for Love."



“A MOVING TRIBUTE
TO ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ELECTRIC PERFORMERS”

VOGUE

“DRAMATIC AND RIVETING...

PROBABLY THE CLOSEST WAY PEOPLE WILL GET TO EXPERIENCE
THE QUEEN OF ROCK AND ROLL'S ARTISTRY AND MAGIC ONE MORE TIME”

Forbes

“INSPIRATIONAL”

Hollywood
REPORTER

“BOLD...
THE MOVIE TRIUMPHS”

Rolling Stone

“EXTRAORDINARY”

VARIETY

“SWEEPING, FASCINATING...

DEEPLY PERSONAL...A BEAUTIFUL, MOVING FILM”

VULTURE

“ILLUMINATING...

A ROUSING DOCUMENTARY”

IndieWire

“AN EXPRESSIONISTIC TOUR DE FORCE...

THE OTHERWORLDLINESS OF TINA IS TRANSPORTING”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



HER LIFE. HER STORY.

HBO ORIGINAL

TINA

NEW DOCUMENTARY
NOW STREAMING

HBOMAX



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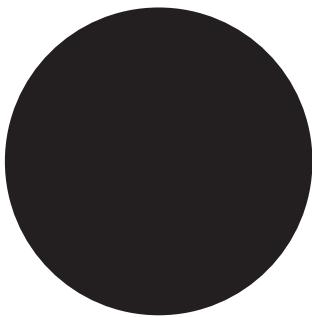
Remembered

1941-2021: Bertrand Tavernier

By Thierry Frémaux



Bertrand Tavernier and Tommy Lee Jones on the set of "In the Electric Mist" in 2009



I met Bertrand Tavernier in Lyon in 1982 at the Chateau Lumière when he came to announce that he was going to become the first president of the Institut Lumière.

He had just come off "Coup de Torchon" and his prestige was at its peak. As I was working for *Positif* magazine, I took the opportunity to question Bertrand about his love for films and his long relationship with the magazine. Shortly after I watched, bewildered,

"Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory," the Lumière brothers' first film, released in 1895; understandably it was a crucial day for me. When I asked Bertrand if I could be a volunteer for the Institut Lumière, he said, "We are alone. Welcome!" To this day, I have never left rue du Premier-Film [where the Institut Lumière is located].

We quickly became friends. When he invited me on the shoot of "Life and Nothing But," I knew I wanted to be by his side from then on. We worked together on "Amis Américains," his book about the Hollywood directors and screenwriters he had known before becoming a filmmaker. When I was named head of the Institut Lumière in 1990, my only request to Bertrand was "Stay president by being who you are. That's how we need you." He was always there, all along, until the end, by supporting our missions through his commitment to culture. Filmmaker, cinephile and Lyonnais — he was perfect.

Everyone will remember the filmmaker, and his ease when he switched from one mise-en-scène to another, from one topic to another (like his friend Michael Powell), his use of voiceover (often his own), the 'Scope format, his way of fighting for each of his projects, for never making a film for money. His filmography is impeccable. Time, which is the best critic, will tell, and I'm sure it will bolster his body of work.

When he was a filmmaker, Bertrand was not at all a cinephile. He would keep a close eye on every step of the making of his films, including the music, like all the great directors do. On set, he would come close to actors and would speak to them softly. Bertrand was someone who pampered others. He had an enveloping presence with his tall stature.

Everyone will also remember the cinephile. From his insatiable gourmandism to his stimulating curiosity: The erudition and love of films as war weapons — there it is! Bertrand also leaves behind films, articles, presentations and DVD bonuses. His

body of work, it's also all that, in a similar fashion to his friend Scorsese.

The Institut Lumière was his home base. He would say, "From the rue du Premier-Film, we can dream of anything!" The creation of the Lumière festival made him scream with joy: "The history of cinema being honored where it all started — we can't do better than that." He was so happy to welcome Francis Coppola, Clint Eastwood, Frances McDormand, Quentin Tarantino, Catherine Deneuve, Miloš Forman, Pedro Almodóvar, the Dardenne brothers and even Jane Fonda. During my early years at the Institut, he had been impressed when I attracted Wim Wenders, Elia Kazan or Joseph Mankiewicz to come visit Lyon. I loved to impress Bertrand.

I would like everyone to remember also the image of a kind man who possessed a deep sense of humanity and an exemplary integrity. And also the memory of someone who would find reasons to laugh in all circumstances, which contrasted with his perpetual awareness of the world in which he lived. We would never get bored. He had a gift of coming across all of life's absurdities, which he would make even funnier by recounting them — like this person who questioned him about the opportunity to take comedy classes by mail. You should have seen Bertrand's face!

I always had the feeling that Bertrand's presence by my side protected me — and I'm not the only one to say this. Beyond the great moments of affection, he would push you to surpass yourself. There was never the beginning of a disagreement, of a dispute, between us. He never played the substitute father or the president-boss. For 40 years, we talked every week, sometimes every day.

His friendship will remain a great gift, a privilege that is rarely given to someone during a lifetime. Cinema is unique, and we are right to lead the lives we lead. But sometimes, it hurts.

Adieu, Bertrand. 

Thierry Frémaux is the director of both the Lumière Film Festival in Lyon and the Cannes Film Festival. He is also the general director of the Institut Lumière. Bertrand Tavernier died March 25 at age 79.

1941-2021: Jessica Walter

No one could go from zero to 100 quite like Jessica Walter.

Walter, who died at the age of 80 on March 24, embodied bold women who made her impossible to forget throughout her 60-year career. In her breakout role, in Clint Eastwood's 1971 thriller "Play Misty for Me," Walter portrayed Evelyn, a woman who becomes so obsessed with Eastwood's radio host that she stalks him, threatens him, threatens to kill herself and then really does kill a police officer who gets in her way. She's a ticking time bomb with no limit, the terrifying embodiment of female obsession 16 years before "Fatal Attraction" became a phenomenon. That Evelyn is a toxic cliché barely matters thanks to Walter's performance, in which her beautiful face twists with alarming, ugly fury. The actor makes Evelyn's pain so visceral it's impossible not to understand.

Walter's résumé is long and varied, spanning auteur films, broadcast

network procedurals, and the broadest of sitcoms. So it's saying something that two of her most iconic roles came in the last third of her storied career, introducing her particular brand of spiky charisma to a new generation of fans.

On Fox's "Arrested Development," which premiered in 2003, Walter played the imperious Lucille Bluth, who loves nothing more than to start her day by dressing down her dearest family members with a snide barb about their deepest insecurities — along with a hearty helping of vodka (and a piece of toast). Lucille mostly acts as a sly agent of chaos warming her hands by the fire of her family's panic, but the show would be lost without Walter providing the sharp reality check of Lucille's disdain.

Simultaneously, on FX's animated series "Archer," Walter voiced Malory, a parallel-universe version of Lucille who runs a spy agency (instead of a guileless family of rich dummies). With her instantly recognizable diamond-grit voice, Walter's performance is an immediate knockout. Hearing her rev up to a burst of profane wrath with such startling speed and precision, even 11 seasons later, remains one of the show's best and most perverse treats.



Year after year, Walter was unparalleled in the art of slicing through nonsense with the raise of a skeptical eyebrow, spicing up scenes with line reads that transformed them, and anchoring a story with the kind of inherent gravitas that can't be taught. But the singular joy of watching her work was in seeing her boil over. Whether letting loose with rage or joy, Walter always seemed to be the star of the show. **•** *Caroline Framke*

1934-2021: George Segal

The quintessential male movie stars of the 1970s (Nicholson, Hoffman, Pacino, De Niro) shared a certain moody, turbulent quality. In a word, they had intensity. George Segal, who died March 23 at 87, was also a major star but occupied a lighter, funnier, more hangdog place, one that probably stood in for more actual men of the era than all those other actors combined. He was the shaggy, self-deprecating fellow haunting the bar, the handsome nice guy with a warm smile trying to hold his middle-class life together. Segal could do the intensity thing (just watch him as a junkie in 1971's "Born to Win"), but he was really a mensch with complications.

He made a splash in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1966), but it was "The Owl and the Pussycat," the 1970 screwball comedy that paired him with Barbra Streisand, that locked in Segal's stardom. He was the first Jewish leading man not to change his surname, and that was noteworthy because Segal, under the wisecracking exterior that would later make him the sitcom sparkplug of "The Goldbergs," had a noody neurotic quality of quiet desperation. It was his destiny to be the slightly bent straight arrow lost in the libertine wilderness. Whether playing the slyly civilized adulterer of "A Touch of Class," the ebullient compulsive gambler of "California Split," or the impasioned screwup navigating the rocky shoals of broken marriage in "Blume in Love" (arguably Segal's finest performance), he did it all with the beginning daze of a put-upon soul saying, "How did I get here?" **•** *Owen Gleiberman*



1936-2021: Larry McMurtry

••••

Larry McMurtry was a master of place. **•** The Texas-born novelist and screenwriter, who died March 25 at the age of 84, was renowned for his skill at crafting distinctive settings. McMurtry's work proves the truth of the filmmaker's cliché about making the location a character in the piece. **•** Whether the windswept dusty streets of the fictional Anarene in "The Last Picture Show" or the suburban Houston of "Terms of Endearment" or cowboys and ranchers tussling on the range in "Lonesome Dove," McMurtry's novels were attractive to Hollywood because they were so grounded in the good earth trod by his characters. **•** McMurtry won a screenwriting Oscar with his longtime collaborator Diana Ossana for his adaptation of E. Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain." True to form, McMurtry explained to *Variety* that the 2005 Ang Lee adaptation was much more than a "gay cowboy movie." In his view, it was a study of "the cultural poverty of the people who live on the high plains." **•** *Cynthia Littleton*



Does 'Nomadland' Have the Oscar Wrapped?

The Searchlight drama keeps winning all the best picture precursor awards

By Clayton Davis



AWARDS CIRCUIT

Film Awards Editor
Clayton Davis provides his analysis, predictions and perspective on the battle for Oscars, Golden Globes and other honors.

Searchlight Pictures' "Nomadland" has shown it has the ability to pass one of the thorniest tests in the Oscar season canon: the preferential ballot. That's the method used for selecting a winner at the Producers Guild Awards, which is also used by the Academy Awards for choosing its top prize. On March 24, the film took home the PGA for best picture, which means it's looking like the Oscar is a done deal.

Of the eight best picture nominees this year, only four — "Minari," "Nomadland," "Promising Young Woman" and "The Trial of the Chicago 7" — seem to have a shot at winning best picture in April. One of the main issues when looking for an alternative to the front-runner is there has to be a consensus on what the No. 2 is (such as "Parasite" over "1917" or "Moonlight" over "La La Land"), which this year has yet to yield.

The next two big precursors on the docket are the SAG Awards on April 4 and the DGA Awards on April 10. The DGA, the PGA and SAG have all coexisted since 1994, shaping the modern-day Oscar race. They overlap greatly with the Academy's acting, directing and producing branches,

and usually give clues of an upset waiting in the wings.

In the past, the perfect storm for a picture winner has been noms in all three guilds' top categories, in addition to nods at the Oscars in directing, writing, acting, editing and obviously picture. This year, none of the eight nominees has all those elements, which marks the second time in 24 years that's occurred (the other was the 2017 lineup that included "The Shape of Water," which missed SAG ensemble).

Ron Howard's "Apollo 13" (1995) is the only film that's won the top prize from the DGA, the PGA and SAG and did not go on to win picture.

The DGA Awards look tailor-made for "Nomadland" director Chloé Zhao, who is set to become the second woman to win the prize (after Kathryn Bigelow in 2010 for "The Hurt Locker").

Mel Gibson's "Braveheart" (1995) and Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" (2019) are the only films since 1995 to win picture and director without winning DGA and PGA. That doesn't bode well for anything not titled "Nomadland."

As we look ahead to the SAG Awards, what can we expect?

Frances McDormand stars in "Nomadland," which is on the path to winning the Academy's top prize.

With a pretaped winners announcement and ceremony taking place, there's a chance the list of winners leaks to the public before the televised show. On March 31, SAG will assemble the comedy and drama television nominees via Zoom to reveal the winners, while on April 1, the TV movie, limited series and film categories will assemble for their Zoom announcement. The show airs on April 4. Anyone participating in the winners announcement must sign an NDA.

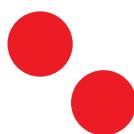
Here are my SAG predictions:

- **Cast Ensemble:** "The Trial of the Chicago 7" (Netflix)
- **Actor:** Chadwick Boseman, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (Netflix)
- **Actress:** Carey Mulligan, "Promising Young Woman" (Focus Features)
- **Supporting Actor:** Daniel Kaluuya, "Judas and the Black Messiah" (Warner Bros.)
- **Supporting Actress:** Yuh-Jung Youn, "Minari" (A24)
- **Stunt Ensemble:** "Mulan" (Walt Disney Pictures)



Learning to Be OK With 'Vinyls'

By Jem Aswad



One day last summer, while my college-age son showed mom and dad his new apartment, he pointed to his roommate's impressive crates of albums and said, "Look at all of his vinyls!"

"Don't you ever say that word again!" my wife and I thundered in mortified unison, as if he were a 5-year-old who'd just dropped an f-bomb. "They're records — or albums, or singular 'vinyl.' But for the love of God, they're never, ever 'vinyls.'"

The resurgence of the format is one of the music world's more counterintuitive developments (vinyl generated nearly \$620 million in retail spending in the U.S. last year and outsold CDs for the first time since 1986, according to the RIAA), especially because it's largely driven by young people who didn't grow up with records. They love them for the same reasons older generations do: The warm, analog sound. The large, immersive artwork. The ritual of gently taking out the disc and putting it on a turntable, as if the additional effort — the sense of having to work for it — somehow makes the music more valuable and valued.

But as much as older devotees love the trend, they're attacking with untrammeled get-off-my-lawn fury Gen Z's use of the plural "vinyls"; even early millennials heap derision on the ungrammatical term. While most vinyl junkies' reaction to a mere mention of the word is sputtering rage, others have a more measured perspective.

"You could say, 'I just got my vinyl copy of the new Landlady album' or 'I just got my Landlady vinyl in the mail,'"

offers FUGA Distribution's Greg Vegas, a collector of magnitude. "But never 'vinyls,'" he adds, shuddering.

Of course, vinyl (singular) has long been a synonym for what multiple generations have always known as records, along with less evergreen terms like "wax," "LPs" and "discs." Merriam-Webster defines it as a secondary term for "phonograph records recorded on vinyl."

The term is derived from polyvinyl chloride, which in the 1940s replaced shellac as the primary substance used to create records due to wartime shortages. Gradually, 33 1/3-rpm long-playing 12-inch albums and 45-rpm 7-inch singles supplanted 78-rpm 10-inch records as the industry standard, and remain so to this day.

However, as the format unexpectedly resurfaced early in this century, records, perhaps for the first time ever, gained a new term. And therein lies the grammatical conundrum: You can buy or play a record, but you can't buy or play a vinyl. Still, several in-the-know figures have overcome their initial abhorrence and grown to accept the word as a sign of changing times.

"Somewhere along the line, I guess I grew as a person," says Carrie Colliton, director of marketing for the Dept. of Record Stores. "If they're buying vinyl — and better yet, buying it from record stores — let these kids call it whatever they want."

Even when confronted with the possibility of "vinyls" joining the controversial "irregardless" in the dictionary, Jason Woodbury, marketing director of long-running independent record store chain Zia Records, waxes philosophical.

"Maybe this new generation uses it as a way to differentiate themselves — or even," he laughs, "to piss off the older generation, like young people always have."

Record player illustration: Stuart Patience

“

IF THEY'RE BUYING VINYL — AND BETTER YET, BUYING IT FROM RECORD STORES — LET THESE KIDS CALL IT WHATEVER THEY WANT.”
—CARRIE COLLITON, DEPT. OF RECORD STORES

VARIETY INTELLIGENCE PLATFORM

VIP+

COMPARATIVELY, A MONSTER WEEKEND

By Kaare Eriksen

The March 31 release of "Godzilla vs. Kong" will nab the best opening weekend at the domestic box since the first pandemic-precipitated closures of cinemas, per entertainment market research firm Guts + Data. The film benefits from high awareness and post-trailer interest levels among weekly survey respondents as well as a lack of competition from tentpoles and could gross nearly \$24 million. That's higher than the hauls of fellow Warner Bros. titles "Tenet," "Wonder Woman 1984" and "Tom & Jerry," the last two of which, like "Godzilla vs. Kong," began streaming day and date on HBO Max. With vaccination efforts helping theaters in top U.S. markets to reopen, now is an opportune but likely brief window for a pandemic-era blockbuster, as spring break gatherings have health experts fearing new variant-driven surges of the coronavirus.

For more data from VIP+, visit variety.com/vip.

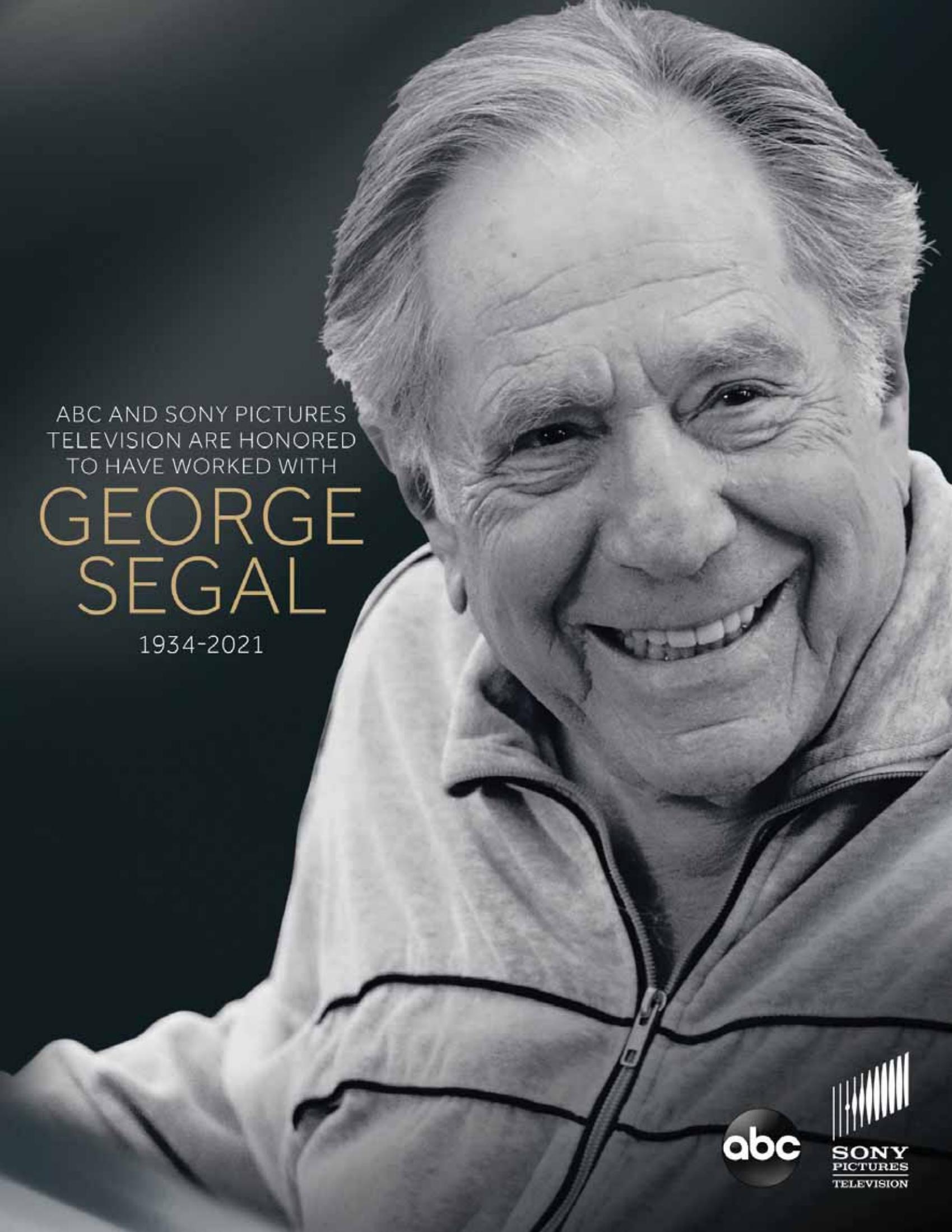


* Guts + Data forecast is based on traditional 3-day Friday-Sunday weekend window

† Includes gross from extended Labor Day weekend window plus undisclosed Canadian gross from prior weekend

‡ Counts 3-day Friday-Sunday window within Thanksgiving weekend

Sources: Guts + Data; Box Office Mojo
Data through March 25



ABC AND SONY PICTURES
TELEVISION ARE HONORED
TO HAVE WORKED WITH

GEORGE SEGAL

1934-2021



OUR TOWN

JUST FOR VARIETY

by Marc Malkin



(1) **Jameela Jamil** is celebrating the one-year anniversary of “I Weigh,” the podcast offshoot of her activist organization of the same name. Guests have included **Billy Porter**, **Demi Lovato**, **Beanie Feldstein** and **Diane Guerrero**, as well as doctors and experts in various fields. During **Reese Witherspoon**’s emotional interview, the Oscar winner teared up while discussing mental health. “Reese cried on my podcast,” Jamil tells me. “It was such an extraordinary moment for her.” Jamil herself has gone public with her mental health struggles. She revealed last month she contemplated suicide after being accused a year ago of exaggerating her health issues. One of her harshest critics was **Piers Morgan**. I’m happy to report that Jamil is no longer allowing Morgan to get to her. “I just don’t care,” she says. In a nod to **Mariah Carey**, Jamil adds with a laugh, “I don’t know her.” Speaking of Carey, she’s on the host’s list of dream guests — as are **Jennifer Aniston** and **Oprah Winfrey**. **Kelly Rowland** appears on the April 2 episode: “Kelly and I met at a party. I heard her somewhat shaming herself about her body or her looks at 1 a.m., and since my online persona is the same as my offline persona, I stood there and gave her a love lecture about how beautiful she is and why she should never talk shit about herself.”

• • •

EXCLUSIVE! I hear Netflix awards guru (2) **Lisa Taback**’s 1922 Cape Cod house in Los Feliz has hit the market for \$3.82 million. The exquisitely restored 4,036-square-foot abode features four bedrooms and four baths, a chef’s kitchen with Viking appliances, a pool and a spa. **Bryan Abrams** at Compass has the listing. ... Meanwhile, (3) **Bob Greenblatt** is still looking for a buyer for his \$4.995 million Bird Streets home. The Craftsman-style Greene and Greene house was once called home by **George Clooney** (pre-“ER”). “I hope to find a new owner who appreciates the craftsmanship of Greene and Greene’s California style,” the former WarnerMedia entertainment chief tells me.

• • •

Yes, (4) **Elvira Lind** had her husband, (5) **Oscar Isaac**, slip into a fat suit for his starring role in her Oscar-nominated short “The Letter Room.” Written and directed by Lind, the film has Isaac playing a corrections officer who’s put in charge of the prison’s mailroom. “He was shooting ‘Dune,’ and he was getting really fit to play the duke, and I needed him to be more round,” says Lind, who was seven months pregnant with their second child during the short film’s five-day shoot. “He was getting skinny, and I was getting bigger,” she says. Since landing her first Oscar nom this month, Lind tells me, “now people are sending me things that are already written. ... I’d love to shoot something within the year.”

• • •

EXCLUSIVE! Broadway Records will release the concept album of “Little Black Book,” **Will Nunziata** and **Billy Recce**’s rock musical about **Heidi Fleiss**, on April 20. The cast includes **Alice Ripley**, **Orfeh**, **Mandy Gonzalez** and **Lillias White**.

• • •

Rob Lowe was the surprise guest during a student reading of “The Outsiders” at William R. Satz Middle School in New Jersey. Lowe, who co-starred in the 1983 film adaptation, interacted with the class using the Komi video app (his son **Matthew** works for Komi). “I felt like I’d won the Super Bowl because the competition was so tough,” Lowe said of working on the film with **Tom Cruise**, **Matt Dillon**, **Patrick Swayze** and **Diane Lane**.

(1)



(2)



(3)



(4)



(5)



EXPOSURE

March 22

'Demi Lovato: Dancing With the Devil' Private Screening

Beverly Hilton, Beverly Hills

Demi Lovato performed at the drive-in screening of her new YouTube doc-series atop the hotel's parking garage. Director Michael D. Ratner introduced her while Shake Shack provided dinner and Craig's offered vegan ice cream for dessert.



March 24 Family Film Awards

Universal Hilton, Universal City

Ann-Margret was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award by Julianne Hough at the 24th annual event. A telecast of the show will air April 22 on Reelz.

March 29

TCL Chinese Theatre Ribbon Cutting

Hollywood

Four directors of the most recent Godzilla and King Kong movies, Gareth Edwards ("Godzilla"), Jordan Vogt-Roberts ("Kong: Skull Island"), Adam Wingard ("Godzilla vs. Kong") and Michael Dougherty ("Godzilla: King of the Monsters"), were on hand to celebrate the upcoming post-COVID reopening of the famed Hollywood Boulevard theater.



Births & Hitched



Frankie Muniz and wife **Paige Price** welcomed their first child, a boy. "I love my baby so much," Muniz wrote on Instagram. "And I love my wife more than ever." Muniz is best known for playing Malcolm on Fox's "Malcolm in the Middle"; Price is a former model.

Bethenny Frankel and **Paul Bernon** are engaged after two and a half years of dating. Frankel is an entrepreneur and television personality best known for her time on the "Real Housewives of New York City"; Bernon is a film producer and real estate developer.

Bindi Irwin gave birth to her and husband **Chandler Powell**'s first child, **Grace Warrior Irwin Powell**, on March 25. "Grace is named after my great-grandmother, and relatives in Chandler's family dating back to the 1700s," Irwin wrote on Instagram. "Her middle names, Warrior Irwin, are a tribute to my dad and his legacy as the most incredible Wildlife Warrior." Like her late father, **Steve Irwin**, Bindi is a conservationist and TV personality; Powell works at the Australia Zoo alongside Irwin.

Fur & Feathers

Wendy Goldstein brought home 7-week-old pug **Shams** on Feb. 18 after rescuing the puppy at adoption center Wags & Walks. Goldstein is the president of West Coast creative at Republic Records.



Judi Marmel and **Steve Marmel** adopted **Dolly**, a 14-week-old Lhasa apso named after entertainment icon **Dolly Parton**. Judi is a founding partner of entertainment company **Levity Live**; Steve is a writer.

Compiled by Haley Bosselman

'Blindness' Leading to Light at the End of NYC's COVID Tunnel

By Michael Appler

When **Daryl Roth**, 13-time Tony-winning producer, first announced that her Off Broadway theater would premiere a production during the pandemic, her argument to the city and state of New York was that "Blindness," the work in question, was a sound and light installation, not quite a play. "It is an adaptation of a book that you might call a play, but not in a traditional sense," she tells *Variety*. "Not as we've known theater before."

On April 2, the first post-COVID evening on which indoor theater is permitted in NYC, "Blindness" will begin performances. An adaptation of **José Saramago**'s acclaimed novel, the show is an audio play about a pandemic of infectious blindness, narrated by **Juliet Stevenson** and directed by **Walter**

Meierjohann. There are no actors and no stage.

"I felt a responsibility in some way to be among the first to give it a go and say, 'We can come back,'" says Roth. "This is a baby step forward. It's not theater as we know it, but it's leading us to the light. You can't be in theater and not take risks, even in the best of times. So this is a big risk in maybe not the best of times."

Simon Stephens, the Tony-winning playwright who began his somewhat destiny-driven adaptation of "Blindness" three years ago, says the work in its current form is theater, which matters most: "It's one place. It's one time. You've got to go somewhere. There's the commitment of the journey across the city. And it's a congregation of strangers." 

"Blindness" will be the first major theater project to open in NYC during the pandemic.



Dinner With a View

The West Hollywood Edition hotel has reopened its rooftop restaurant for dinner. Food at The Roof offers a Southern California-Mexican menu by chef **John Fraser**. Reservations required. edition-hotels.com ... Just a few blocks south, **Lance Bass** has signed a lease to rent the space that once housed gay nightclub Rage. Located at Santa Monica and San Vicente boulevards, the bar is across the street from Rocco's, also co-owned by the former boy bander. Per a website promoting the venture, it will be "the biggest gay nightclub in the USA." wehomeclub.com



The Roof is open for dinner daily.

MUST ATTEND

March 31

- **Hanif Abdurraqib** discusses his new book "A Little Devil in America" as part of the Unbound series presented by BAM and Greenlight Bookstore. bam.org
- The Santa Barbara International Film Festival opens with "Invisible Valley," director **Aaron Maurer**'s documentary about the lives of undocumented workers in Southern California's Coachella Valley. sbiff.org

April 2

- Sugar Rush, a candy-centered experiential installation, opens at the Westfield Promenade in L.A.'s Woodland Hills. Featured are oversize props, art displays, parade floats, photo ops, performances and more. Runs through May 2. ridesugarrush.com

April 5

- "Hamilton" star **Mandy Gonzalez** has a conversation about her book, "Fearless," with Lin-Manuel Miranda. strandbooks.com

April 6

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Anna Deavere Smith
→

STRATEGIC

ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE FILED FOR BANKRUPTCY
DUE TO COVID. AS THEATERS REOPEN,
IT AIMS TO LEAD A BOX OFFICE RENAISSANCE.

RETREAT

BY BRENT LANG
AND
REBECCA RUBIN

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY
IAN ALLEN





ALAMO

Drafthouse was riding high.

The Austin, Texas-based theater chain had managed the difficult feat of expanding its footprint nationally, popping up in major metropolises such as New York and Los Angeles without losing its indie spirit. Its unabashed love of all things cinema, menus crammed with craft beer and locally sourced snacks, and themed events with A-list talent like Wes Anderson and Rian Johnson made Alamo the envy of the exhibition industry. And then in March 2020, disaster struck. The coronavirus pandemic forced the chain to shutter its 41 locations and furlough 80% of its 6,000 employees.

“You can’t save your way to success during a pandemic,” says Shelli Taylor, Alamo Drafthouse CEO. “That’s a great tool when you have revenue coming in the door, but when there’s no revenue there is no saving. So what do you do?”

In early March, unable to continue servicing its \$105 million in long-term debt, Alamo filed for Chapter 11. Its investors claim that the company will reemerge from bankruptcy with a cleaner balance sheet, one that will allow it to capitalize on a revival in moviegoing that Hollywood expects will unfold as COVID-19 starts to fade and vaccinations continue to rise.

“I’m not carrying the stigma of the big ‘B’ bankruptcy word,” says Tim League, the company’s founder and executive chairman. “It’s not the kind of bankruptcy of fire sales and total failure. Chapter 11 was created for businesses that were profitable, and have a means to become profitable again, but were subject to circumstances that put them in temporary financial difficulties. It’s specifically for good businesses to ride out the storm and come back strong.”

Alamo’s challenges mirror those of the entire cinema industry, which has just endured the most punishing 12-month stretch in its century-long history. Can it put its financial house in order while recapturing its pre-pandemic swagger? Will it be able to successfully remind customers of the fun they once had sipping a microbrew and munching on truffle popcorn while watching the latest Tarantino flick? Are its customers so eager to go out and socialize after a year of being housebound that they’ll see anything and everything that hits the big screen, or will COVID-19 prove to be the final nail in the coffin of the theatrical experience?

“The Alamo news was a shot in the gut,” says Jeff Bock, a box office analyst with Exhibitor Relations. “This was a company that seemed to be doing everything right. If they filed for bankruptcy, it meant no one was safe. Film distribution is a precarious, low-margin business and it’s probably going to

continue to be that way over the next few months or even years as we ride the wave of consumer confidence.”

Last year, that wave was a ripple, one that left cinemas adrift and wondering how to move forward. With theaters closed for months or operating at reduced capacity, and studios delaying most of their major blockbusters, global box office receipts plunged 72% to \$12 billion. Top chains and indie theaters alike were awash in red ink — AMC Theaters, the world’s largest exhibitor, lost a stunning \$4.6 billion in 2020 due to COVID-19, while Cinemark, another major chain, lost \$618 million.

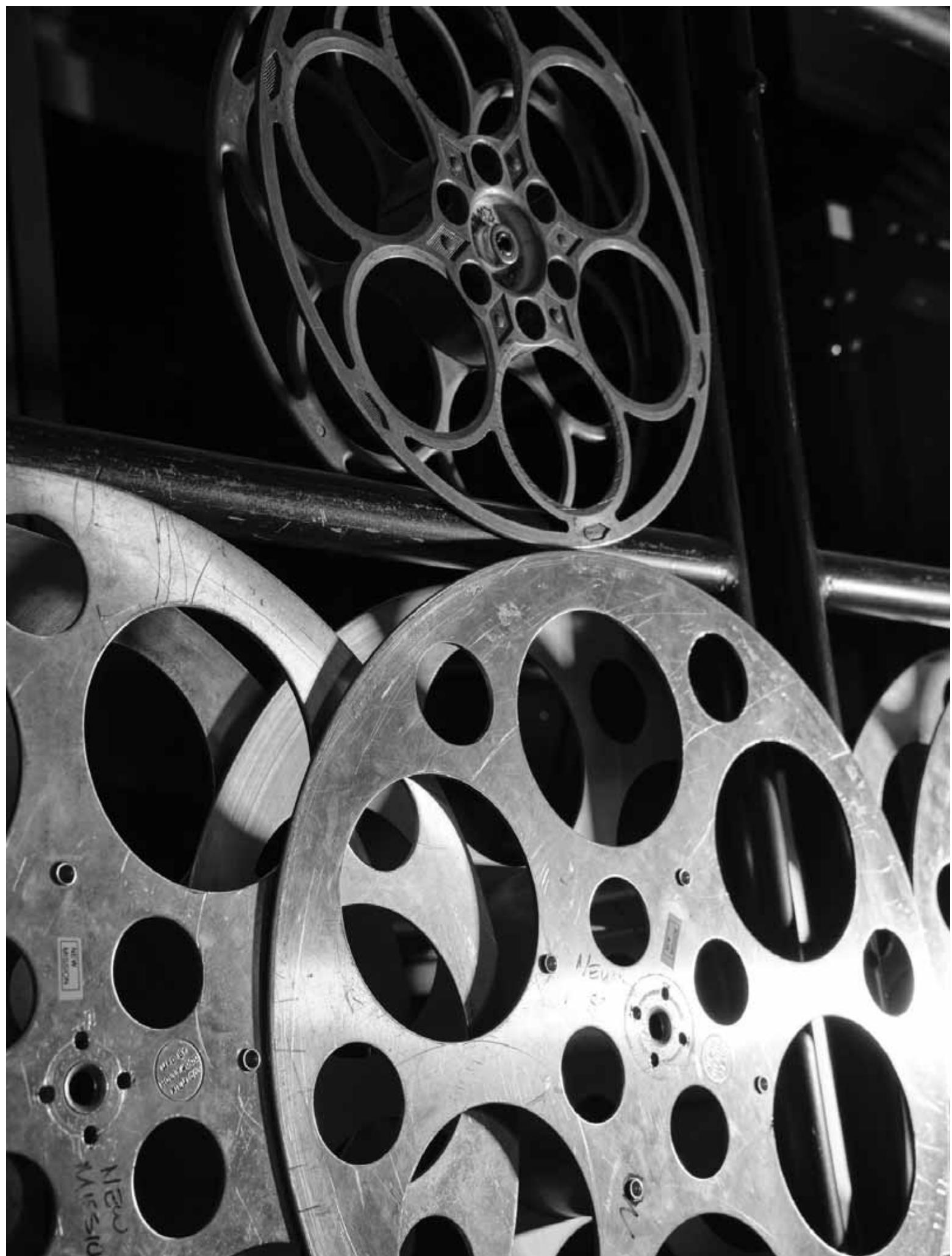
Cinema operators, at least the ones who have managed to stay in business during the pandemic, believe that salvation is at hand. They point to the recent record-breaking box office receipts in China, where the virus

“YOU HAVE TO GET THROUGH THE BAD TIMES AND START OPERATING AGAIN AND START THAT PATH TOWARD NORMALCY. THEN PEOPLE MAY BE INTERESTED IN REINVESTING IN CINEMAS.”

— TIM LEAGUE, ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE FOUNDER



Alamo Drafthouse's New Mission Cinema in San Francisco is among the many theaters that has been temporarily closed by the pandemic. On the following pages: Empty film spools accent the projection room; the balustrade to the second floor is a work of art; movie posters adorn the theater's entryway.



is under control, as evidence that people are desperate to return to theaters.

"People crave normalcy," says Richard L. Gelfond, CEO of Imax. "When things feel safe, they want to go back to the movies in record numbers. It's a false narrative to suggest that people might not come back. We've already answered that question in places like China."

In the case of Alamo Drafthouse, the chain filed for Chapter 11 as a condition of bringing on a new equity partner: Fortress Investment. As part of the plan, Altamont Capital, which has been one of the company's backers since 2018, will reinvest, as will League, though his equity position will be diminished once the company reemerges. League insists that both private equity firms are in it for the long haul — they're not just looking to get a distressed asset at bargain-basement prices and sell it for parts.

"They're investing in a company that they believe in," says League. "They're looking to see us survive and thrive and continue the work we're doing."

Of course, bankruptcy carries risks. There's the possibility, for instance, that the group League assembled could be outbid by other investors during the auction they intend to hold as part of the Chapter 11 process. That would leave the future of the company out of League's control. However, experts say that, on paper, Alamo's Chapter 11 plans appear smoother and better thought out than other media bankruptcies (think Relativity or Global Road, both of which failed to rebound from their chaotic attempts to get their financial houses in order).

"It's unusual to see the original investors buy back into the property in this way," says Zev Shechtman, a partner at law firm Danning Gill. "It seems like the reason they're doing that is they believe in the business, have an emotional attachment to it and believe they can make it succeed again."

By going into bankruptcy, Shechtman notes, Alamo can get out of some onerous leases that were burdening the company with debt. As part of the plan, the theater chain will close two underperforming venues in Texas and one in Kansas City.

"For 15-plus years we've made every payment on time, and now all of a sudden we're in a bad spot," says Taylor. "Some vendors have been great about helping us try to figure out a solution, and some of them just don't care. They need their payment and it's our problem and not theirs. I logically don't understand that."

League had tried to avoid going the bankruptcy route. Over the winter, Alamo sought to renegotiate its debt with Bank of America and other lenders but found it could not reach a deal that would provide the capital needed to keep operating. Inves-

tors, League says, were wary of getting involved in the exhibition business when its future was shrouded with uncertainty.

"We were having a lot of discussions with folks, but the reality was we had too much debt and needed to figure out a way through it," says League. "It was not that easy in December to get anybody interested in investing in cinemas. You have to get through the bad times and start operating again and start that path toward normalcy. Then people may be interested in reinvesting in cinemas."

FOR MORE

than two decades, League has operated Alamo with a kind of missionary zeal, preaching the gospel of celluloid magic. As the major movie chains gobbled each other up and the exhibition landscape became more corporatized and conglomerated, League cut a different path. While these chains focused on commanding as many multiplexes as they could to sell as many tickets to the latest Hollywood blockbusters, Alamo embraced cult favorites as well as indie and foreign-language fare. It leaned into customer service and guest experience; in place of tubs of popcorn and oversize sodas, its full-service menu boasted burgers and pizza, craft beer and cocktails. Most movie theaters in the early aughts had all the intimacy and character of a big-box store, but Alamo's cinemas were different. League, an inveterate collector, used the venues to display his treasure trove of classic movie posters. He would also fill the theater bars with curiosities ranging from the wax models of medical abnormalities that line the watering hole of its Brooklyn venue to the vintage printing press scheduled to adorn its upcoming lower Manhattan showplace.

"It's like a party," says Rian Johnson, the director of "Knives Out." "There's something unstuffy and everyone is there to have a good time."

League's life in movies started modestly enough. He was an engineer by training, but, dissatisfied with his career at Shell Oil, he began daydreaming about a way to get into the film business. After a failed attempt to create a cinema in a run-down part of Bakersfield, Calif., an effort that collapsed in part over his inability to get a liquor license, League and his wife, Karrie, moved back in with her parents. They set about raising money for a new theater in Austin, which was then on the cusp of becoming a mecca for artists, hippies and other denizens of the outré. Finding a parking garage in Austin's warehouse district that League thought could work as a theater, he cobbled together \$250,000 in working capital. His in-

laws mortgaged their house; he borrowed money from his father and mother and racked up tens of thousands of dollars in credit card debt.

Early on, League developed a policy that would become a staple of the Alamo experience. He was offering a special on Pabst Blue Ribbon during a screening of "Blue Velvet" when he noticed the audience was getting rowdy and talking back to the screen. That weekend, using Final Cut Pro, he pieced together a pre-show message informing the audience that neither talking nor texting would be tolerated, and violators would be tossed out.

"It became part of our identity to signal that this is a sacred space," says League.

The theater quickly became one of the fastest-growing brands in movies. Using a franchise model, Alamo rapidly expanded its screen count and saw its national profile rise as well. Before

"WE NEED TO HAVE THE SLATE STICK. THAT'S REALLY CRITICAL BECAUSE IT WILL GIVE THE MOVIEGOERS HOPE AND IT WILL GIVE US HOPE AND WE'LL WANT TO OPEN MORE THEATERS."

— SHELLI TAYLOR, ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE CEO

COVID-19 shook up its business, Alamo was averaging eight new locations annually. But League says he was able to keep the brand from feeling too corporate by empowering the creative managers — giving them license to put their own imprint on operations.

"We want our culinary teams to engage with local vendors and we have someone whose job it is to engage with community relations," he says. "We're undeniably a chain, but the idea was to expand and not feel like a chain but more like a loose network of neighborhood and community theaters that have some oversight to make sure that we're all marching in the same direction."

Customers loved what League was selling. In 2019, a year that saw the domestic box office fall 4%, Alamo's revenues rose 5%, showing that it could still grow even as the overall business constricted.

League wants to recapture that momentum. Last year, he brought in Taylor, a former Starbucks executive who had helped oversee the coffee giant's expansion in China, to help Alamo grow. Even though the exhibitor is shuttering some of its venues as part of the bankruptcy, League says Altamont and Fortress are committed to helping the chain continue to find new cities to plant its flag. And he thinks the pandemic will give him some opportunities to get bigger.

"That's the next chapter — Chapter 12, you can call it," says League. "There are going to be quite a few theaters that do shutter, probably the neglected theaters of certain circuits, and what that's going to do is open up new opportunities and holes in the market for us to take advantage of."

PEOPLE

may be ready to return to the movies when COVID dissipates, but even as Alamo and other theaters prepare to welcome back customers, they face a very different landscape than the one they operated in before the public health crisis hit. With the pandemic keeping theaters closed, studios, which had long bristled over the amount of time they had to keep movies exclusively in cinemas, searched for alternatives. Many of their solutions

could shrink that theatrical window to a couple of weeks from the typical 90 days that was the standard before the coronavirus.

Universal Pictures, for instance, signed a deal with AMC, Cinemark and others that cut them in on a percentage of home entertainment revenues in exchange for letting the studio release its movies on demand within 17 days of their debut. Paramount has offered a 32-day window, while Warner Bros. opted to debut its entire 2021 slate on HBO Max at the same time they screen in theaters, something it has said is a temporary state of play. Still, it's unclear what the new rules of the road will be when things start to get back to normal.

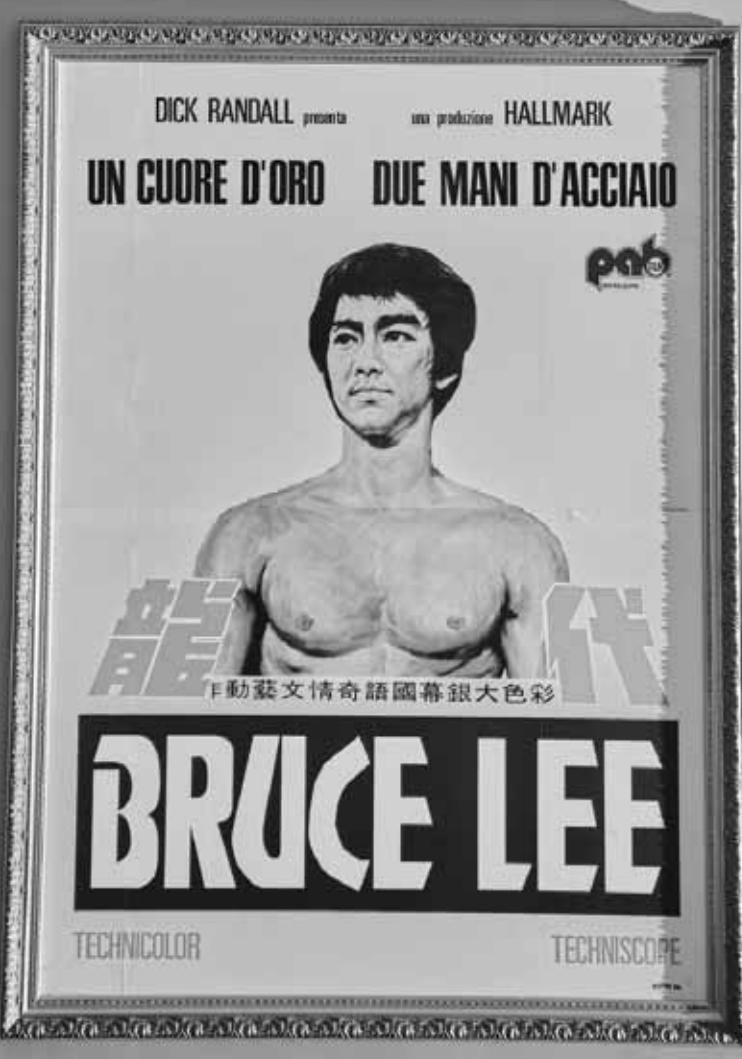


Tim League at the Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar cinema in Austin, Texas



League: Photograph by Brent Humphreys





"Theatrical release windows and strategies will be different than they were before the pandemic," says John Fithian, head of the National Assn. of Theatre Owners. "But pandemic release models are pandemic release models. People in our industry understood that in order to get movies in theaters, release models had to be different because studios had to monetize their content. But what these new windows will look like going forward will be a topic of discussion."

League isn't overly concerned with the prospect of keeping movies in theaters for shorter periods of time. Alamo hasn't signed on to the Universal proposal, but the theater chain says it's willing to talk with the studio and its brethren about finding some sort of compromise. And Alamo is willing to listen, particularly if it can share in the home entertainment revenue.

"It's a time of experimentation," says League. "For blockbuster Hollywood movies, I want to see an exclusive window for theaters, but I think we can work within a shortened window. It's inevitable that will happen. I go into those conversations with a spirit of partnership. Studios are the ones spending the money on a billion-dollar movie, but I'm a strong believer that our theaters can play a huge part in recouping that investment."

With New York City and Los Angeles giving the greenlight for cinemas to reopen, most major centers of moviegoing have returned. The box office, though still a fraction of what it was pre-pandemic, has begun to slowly shake off its torpor. But exhibitors are still facing some fierce headwinds. In many cities, public health requirements mean that theaters can operate at only 25% capacity, making it nearly impossible for them to turn a profit. Plus, rates of infection have plateaued but remain at high levels, which could make some customers hesitant to buy tickets. Cinemas point to the new safety and cleaning measures they've instituted, but many theater operators believe that they need to make a more concerted public relations push to remind customers what they've missed about the big-screen experience.

"The question is how quickly can we turn the corner in terms of really getting the public aware that moviegoing has returned and there are films they want to see," says Greg Laemmle, owner of Laemmle Theatres, a chain of art-house venues in California. "Hopefully they can increase the capacity restrictions so the path to profitability for exhibition is there."

Of course, it will be hard to get people excited to see movies again if there aren't exciting movies for them to go see. For much of the past year, studios have been pushing, postponing or indefinitely delaying their films, frightened of releasing them when so many theaters are closed or operating at just a fraction of their

capacity. Last week, Marvel opted to move "Black Widow" from early May to July 9, and announced that the film would also debut for \$30 on Disney Plus. The decision was a blow to exhibitors, who hope that's the last big, splashy popcorn flick to get delayed. They're banking on other blockbusters like "Fast 9" and "Top Gun: Maverick" to move forward with plans to open this summer so that there's more to play on screens than just Netflix movies and "Tenet."

"We need to have the slate stick," says Taylor. "For the first time since I joined Alamo it looks like movies may move a couple of weeks, but we're not looking at them moving whole quarters or a year. That's really critical because it will give the moviegoers hope and it will give us hope and we'll want to open more theaters."

Even when major movies open, analysts think that it will take time to dig out of the financial hole left by COVID. The box office could start to rebound this summer, but some experts believe that attendance won't go back to pre-pandemic levels for at least another year.

"We're going to crawl and then we're going to walk and then we're going to run," says Fithian. "It will be into 2022 before we see a return to normalcy in box office."

Studios have used the pandemic to experiment with how to release and monetize the movies they make, but theaters have also attempted to find new revenue streams. Many, including Alamo, have offered private theater rentals, allowing patrons to reserve a screen for their friends and family as a way of ensuring they won't be exposed to COVID. They've also experimented with video on demand, offering their customers a chance to rent new movies through their proprietary websites. Many of these advances could outlast the pandemic — some may even provide meaningful new sources of profits long after the coronavirus has faded from memory.

Ultimately, convincing people to head to a theater near them will involve giving them something they can't find on the panoply of streaming services that have thrived during the COVID era. To that end, Alamo has tapped into the sacred cinematic tradition of "let's put on a show" to create programming that can only be found on the big screen. This month it is hosting a virtual "Lord of the Rings" reunion of director Peter Jackson and Middle-earth vets like Cate Blanchett, Ian McKellen and Elijah Wood that will accompany a screening of a remastered version of the trilogy. It is also hosting "Dazed and Confused" screenings with director Richard Linklater and the film's original cast. Both reunions will be prerecorded and made available for free to any cinema in the

world as part of a program that League has christened "Support Local Cinemas."

"We see it as an all-ships-rise environment right now," he says.

Of course, the Alamo founder is embarking on this big push while his company prepares to enter bankruptcy, an experience that will determine the destiny of the iconoclastic chain. But it also signals that as long as League is at the helm, certain foundational principles will remain.

"We're not going to change the core of who we are," League says. "The programming will continue. The whimsy of the experience will continue. The core reasons why we exist and why Karrie and I built the damn theater in the first place are still there. No talking. No texting. Great beer, great food, great sound, great picture. We're going to keep on doing what we've been doing for nearly 25 years." ●

"IT WILL BE INTO 2022 BEFORE WE SEE A RETURN TO NORMALCY IN BOX OFFICE."

—

JOHN FITHIAN,

NATO

DATELINE: DIGITAL

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TV'S

streaming wars have erupted in Hollywood and are wreaking havoc on Madison Avenue. They are even making a splash in places like Gainesville, Ga.

Wesley Lowery recently visited this town in the northeastern portion of the state, part of an effort to create a report for "60 Minutes Plus," the new streaming-news counterpart to the venerable CBS newsmagazine. Lowery, one of a handful of correspondents hired for the Paramount Plus series, focuses on the plight of health care workers amid the coronavirus pandemic. "A lot of them haven't had much relief," notes the journalist, who takes a few minutes to discuss his work even though he has just about 48 hours before his story is slated to go out over the digital ether.

TV counterparts such as Lesley Stahl or Bill Whitaker usually get 12 to 13 minutes to tell their stories. Lowery says he may get as many as 20 to 30. "We are at a time when, because of the pace of our news cycle, things move so quickly. For a lot of us, the news, day in and day out, can feel like noise," he says. "At the end of the week, you want to sit down and watch something longer and more thoughtful." On TV, those "60 Minutes" segments take up significantly more time than most reports. But at roughly half an hour, a 60 Minutes Plus report would be more like a miniature documentary.

The big media companies are betting on people like Lowery to help them stay connected to viewers who are increasingly leaving traditional TV. Executives believe news can play a major part. As more of their audiences choose streaming video to watch their favorite movies, dramas and comedies on demand, news and sports are among the few sure ways TV has to keep assembling the large, live crowds advertisers crave and distributors demand. Executives think news will help spark relationships between headline aficionados and streaming services, and hope the dynamic will help cut down on "churn" — people starting and stopping subscriptions based on programming options.

What's more, the Netflixes and Hulus of the world have certainly ramped up competition to launch the next "Orange Is the New Black" or "The Handmaid's Tale," but their efforts to create time-sensitive programming — series that echo TV's late-night crowd and feature hosts like Chelsea Handler and Sarah Silverman — haven't fared as well.

Enter the TV news crew. Getting into streaming is "pretty critical," says Jonathan Dunn, global leader of McKinsey's consumer, technology and media practice. Revenue from advertising and distribution is in decline, he says, and the mainstream news outlets by and large have launched "nonthreatening, non-cannibalizing incremental products and services — a little bit of extra content to serve the super fans."

Suddenly, a lot of new ideas are coming to the surface.

Breaking news is one of the more prominent parts of ViacomCBS' Paramount Plus streaming service, and the offering has been designed to highlight CBSN, the livestreaming outlet that launched in 2014, says Christy Tanner, executive vice president and general manager of CBS News Digital. WarnerMedia's CNN is expected in weeks to come to unveil a more definitive direct-to-consumer business that people familiar with the matter suggest could put some of its anchors at the helm of projects related to their direct areas of knowledge. CNN

declined to make executives available for comment on any potential strategy. Meanwhile, Fox News Media's streaming outlet, Fox Nation, has struck talent deals with Tucker Carlson and Nancy Grace, and Jason Klarman, the service's president, says it's looking to expand its programming, which could include original movies and series related to crime and real estate. The company has even named an executive to oversee "Tucker Carlson digital products."

Anchors are among those who stand to benefit from the digital rush. Savannah Sellers is, at 29, NBC News' youngest anchor, but her willingness to get involved with "Stay Tuned," a news show designed for Snapchat, and a morning program on the NBC News Now streaming service has made her as well known in some circles as colleague Savannah Guthrie. Sellers says her viewers want the news presented with more immediacy and less artifice, without voice-of-God delivery and "newsy proper" on-screen conventions. In the not-so-distant past, Sellers would have waited years to get an a.m. anchor slot, "but because we have these new platforms, we are able to say to our most promising young talent, 'Here's a morning show — and go for it,'" says Noah Oppenheim, president of NBC News.

Both ABC News and MSNBC have added traditional linear duties to anchors — Linsey Davis and Mehdi Hasan, respectively — whose assignments primarily related to streaming. ABC News this week expanded Davis' primetime show on ABC News Live from an hour to 90 minutes. "We have so many elements and things coming in from our newsgathering teams across the country and globe that putting it all into an hour wasn't enough," says Seni Tienabeso, executive producer of ABC News Live. Hallie Jackson, the NBC News senior Washington correspondent, is getting a weekly show on NBC News Now. ABC News also has plans to launch shows for Hulu led by anchors including Jonathan Karl.

Streaming hits may be based less on the story of the day and more on the passion and expertise individual journalists can bring to the table. "We've gotten past the election and inauguration, and the networks are trying to figure it all out," says Rachel Adler, a television agent at CAA. "They have a captive audience and want to ensure they've created some loyalty that's not just built on the chaos of the news cycle but on the network's talent and programming."

Broadcast and cable TV remain important, as do the dollars that flow from that business. Still, there's an emphasis on digital that is more urgent than in the past. "One thing we can say with certainty is that streaming has to be part of any responsible strategy," says Oppenheim. "It's increasingly the center of any responsible strategy."

Surprisingly, the rise of streaming news is helping to build a business in something for which TV was once better known — in-depth content. While digital media has sped up the pace of our lives and gave certain former U.S. presidents license to set domestic and foreign policy on Twitter, many of the most traditional purveyors of video news are using their streaming outlets to slow things down.

Rather than dishing out quick bits of information, these outlets are swinging for viewers who want more than red-versus-blue talking heads and a couple of sound bites. ABC News is using ABC News Live to cover every moment of the looming trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death — something that simply wouldn't be possible on the broadcast network over the course of a day. "They can follow every single second," says Katie den Daas, executive producer of the streaming outlet. Over at "The Choice," an offering from NBCUniversal's Peacock that examines the news through a progressive lens, anchor Zerlina Maxwell has only five minutes of commercials per hour and takes viewers through segments that can last nearly 18 minutes. Since launching the program in October while working remotely, she has featured interviews with Black farmers as well as a 9-year-old kid doing good things amid the pandemic. "We have time to get into it," she says. "Streaming gives you the space."

There are good reasons why.



FOX
NATION'S
NANCY GRACE

While TV news executives continue to look at Nielsen ratings as a barometer of success, their streaming units do not. That may change down the road, but for now, execs seem more concerned about how many users check in monthly and how many hours of content are streamed in total. "We are not making arbitrary decisions based on how long a commercial break is or how long a segment is because we are trying to beat the Nielsen clock," says den Daas.

News outlets aren't copying their cable and broadcast formats due to another, more basic factor: They can't. Offering up "The Rachel Maddow Show 2," "Fox & More Friends" or "CBS Evening News: Expanded Edition" might add unwanted wrinkles to an already complicated relationship between broadcast and cable networks and the TV stations and cable systems that distribute them. The networks collect millions of dollars each year in fees from their distributors, and duplicating the product for streaming that they send out every day might jeopardize those revenues. "It forces us to get creative and to cultivate new faces," says Oppenheim.

Even when established anchors do a show for a digital venue, the program usually looks different from their traditional perch. Anderson Cooper hosts a streaming show for CNN called "Full Circle" that is more informal than his "Anderson Cooper 360." The program, says Cooper,

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"gives us a chance to cover interesting and compelling stories that might not make an evening news broadcast. It's a less formal format and allows us to devote significant amounts of time to certain topics or interviews."

But another factor is pushing networks to veer away from the stuff they put on their broadcast and cable schedules. Producers and executives say streaming customers don't always want it.

"We have seen over the course of the past five years that there is a large segment of the audience that is seeking knowledge, as opposed to opinion," says CBS' Tanner. "We have made a very conscious decision to not incorporate opinion into the stream."

Even Fox Nation sees a chance to cultivate an audience broader than the one for Fox News, the outlet that has thrived for years on primetime programming from adamant hosts like Sean Hannity. Yes, there still are shows based on right-leaning politics. But Fox Nation will offer episodes of the new "America's Most Wanted" from Fox Broadcasting as well as an "after-show" discussion with Grace. If Tubi is Fox Corp.'s ad-supported video outlet, think of Fox Nation as the company's subscription option. "We know that there's an opportunity for us to expand beyond opinion and news on the service," says Klarman. "We have 'Duck Dynasty' and 'America's Most Wanted' with Nancy Grace. We've got movies. And I think we are moving toward a lifestyle and entertainment service."

Streaming venues are also quickly becoming a place for "insta-docs," or short-form documentaries on trending topics and stories. CBSN has run 73 documentaries since its launch and acquired its first long-form piece in the fall. "We are looking at doing more acquisitions and producing long-form documentaries in-house," says Tanner. ABC News found a vibrant audience for its "20/20" true-crime stories on Hulu after expanding the TV program to two hours, says Beth Hoppe, senior vice president for long form. "Those two-hour binges are the perfect length for streaming," she says, noting the unit has also ramped up production of stand-alone pieces that give viewers greater context around recent headlines.

With more streaming comes more screen time, and, anchors and producers know, more exposure in front of audiences prone to scrutinize what they are watching. "I'm a writer. I always want to go long," says Lowery, the "60 Minutes Plus" correspondent. Still, he cautions, "You can't hide anything in 20 minutes. It's all got to be good." ■



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Cartoon Saloon used historical woodblocks and rustic aesthetic for 'Wolfwalkers' • By Jazz Tangcay

Newcomer Apple TV Plus landed its first Oscar nomination in the animated feature category thanks to "Wolfwalkers."

A mix of 17th century Irish folklore with female empowerment and actual history, it comes from animation studio Cartoon Saloon, the third in its Irish trilogy after "The Secret of Kells" and "Song of the Sea."

The artists deliberately left pencil lines in as part of their visual storytelling. Animators were encouraged by co-directors Ross Stewart and Tomm Moore to be as scribby as possible to fit in with the timeless aesthetic that 2D hand-drawn animation provides — brushstrokes and etchings included.

That style, and setting the film in 1650 when Catholic Ireland was overcome

by English Protestant rule, helped give "Wolfwalkers" its fairytale feel. In the story, young Robyn (voiced by Honor Kneafsey) wants to go into the woods with her father when he hunts wolves. She sneaks off without his permission and befriends Mebh (voiced by Eva Whittaker), a young and fearless wolfwalker.

Moore was concerned with the polarization he was seeing in the world. It reminded him of the divide in Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants that dates back centuries, and he wanted to reflect it in the story.

Federico Pirovano, who designed the girls in their wolf personas, says: "These two girls represent the worlds they are coming from and they would reinforce the storytelling concept."

Robyn represented the town and the English people who were rigid in their



↑ The main characters of "Wolfwalkers" had to keep their individuality even as they transformed in wolves.

← "Wolfwalkers" depicts a lush, magical environment outside the city walls.

beliefs. She was drawn in sharp angles to reflect that rigidity. Since she was the older girl, they made her taller and skinnier. Mebh is the exact opposite. Pirovano describes her as a “ball who bounces around. She is filled with energy.” She represented freedom. “Her shape was round and her shape was flowier.”

The goal was to make both girls relatable not just to one another, but also to the public. “A lot of work went into refining their expressions and emotions,” he says, and that became even more important when both girls transform into wolves.

Pirovano took inspiration from European wolves, opting for the scrawny and rough around the design of the edges as opposed to the classical and imposing version. He added huge fangs and a big snout. The idea, he says, was so the wolves could transition through different emotional states.

“They could go from very aggressive to playful. They could be goofy or they could be scary. We see that when they get angry and show their rage.”

Eimhin McNamara created the “wolf vision” sequences as Robyn transforms, designing scenes so audiences could see things through Robyn’s eyes.

“One challenge was how to translate these gorgeous backgrounds into a 3D world without the design breaking,” McNamara says.

His objective was to make sure everything felt like it was still in the same universe and not jolt the audience out of the viewing experience.

A team of up to 10 people worked on the wolfvision process.

“I would design and build previz in 3D and print it out on paper,” he says. And while the effects were being animated, rendering was being done.

There were marks from graphite sticks, erasers, smudging and big sweeps to give the moment a tactile feel. McNamara worked closely with Ross to discuss how much detail was needed for each frame.

Mark Mullery, who served as the film’s assistant director, aligned with Stewart and Moore’s vision. “He didn’t want any of the 3D elements to be onscreen,” McNamara says. “We used it as a reference point and then we rebuilt it with drawings. It didn’t matter if it was wobbly because that was a part of the charm.”

Sound editor Sébastien Marquilly recorded a pack of wolves, while Axel Steichen went out into a forest and placed eight microphones in a field to capture the environment directly in Atmos.

Elsewhere, sound editor Philippe Fontaine worked on creating the “magic particles.” Those moments, he says, were captured using a few ice cubes and water.

“I shook it a bit, and I recorded the ice cubes hitting one another, and with a bit of digital processing, we had our magical particle sound.”

As Marquilly says, the idea of the sound design was “to be natural aligning with the theme of the film.”

→ **“A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon” from Aardman reps one of Netflix’s Oscar noms for animated content.**



Animated Voices Thrive at Streamer

Relatively new to the format, Netflix has attracted veterans and fresh faces to create a lively toon town • By Carole Horst

Netflix not only grabbed a ton of Oscar nominations for its live-action films, it also grabbed three noms for animated fare including “Over the Moon” and “A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon.” They scored in the animated feature category alongside Disney/Pixar’s “Soul” and “Onward,” and GKIDS/Apple TV Plus’ “Wolfwalkers,” while “If Anything Happens, I Love You” is the frontrunner in animated shorts.

It’s an impressive haul for a part of the streaming giant that is relatively new.

“It’s hard to even find the words to describe how thrilling it is,” says Melissa Cobb, VP of kids and family entertainment at Netflix. She is an animation veteran who was brought over from DreamWorks in 2017 to lead the division.

“I started there about 3½ years ago, and for filmmakers to choose to entrust their film, but also their time — three or four years of their life that it takes to make an animated movie — to a brand-new studio with no track record, with no history of making animated features, for them to choose to come to Netflix was a big leap of faith. So I felt very personally responsible for them having made that decision and wanting it to feel like it was ultimately the right decision for them.”

Animation legend Glen Keane, who nabbed his first Oscar nom for a feature with “Over the Moon” (he won an Oscar two years ago with Kobe Bryant for the

short “Dear Basketball”) was one who made that leap.

“I mean, Glen Keane was one of the first people that stepped through the door, and we sort of held hands and talked about what we wanted to build, and would he come and be part of building this really sort of new approach to making animated films that was more creator first and very creator driven,” Cobb says. “And he jumped right in” along with the “Over the Moon” creative team. “So to have a moment for their work to be rewarded is just thrilling for all of us.”

Netflix’s reputation of fostering creative voices and freedom on the live-action side has helped attract animation talent such as Keane, Guillermo del Toro (hit series “Trollhunters,” “Pinocchio”), “Big Hero 6” helmer Chris Williams (“Jacob and the Sea Beast”), “Back to the Outback” from the team of Harry Cripps and Claire Knight, Aardman (“Robin Robin,” “Chicken Run 2”), “The Breadwinner’s” Nora Twomey (“My Father’s Dragon”), “James and the Giant Peach” helmer Henry Selick (“Wendell and Wild” with Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key) and Chris Miller and Phil Lord (“The Mitchells vs. the Machines”).

“We have team members all over the world that are looking for and supporting filmmakers from different countries

and different backgrounds,” Cobb says. Netflix is also working with some first-time directors, including long-time VFX supervisor Wendy Rogers, who is filming “The Magician’s Elephant.”

Cobb points out that the short film format is something new to the streamer, but has made a big impact on the team, especially the exquisite “If Anything Happens, I Love You.”

“We hadn’t really been pursuing short films before. ... And this year we ended up picking up three short films [“Canvas,” “Cops and Robbers” and “If Anything...”]. The reason that we picked them up was because we were so moved by the content, and we wanted to amplify the stories, the messages of the stories, and also it’s an opportunity for those filmmakers to have their work seen.”

“If Anything ...,” from Michael Govier and Will McCormack, deals with what happens to a family after a school shooting.

“It was such a project of passion for them to create that, and it’s such a meaningful, and unfortunately, very timely message, in that story. So we’re just thrilled that they, again, went with us for it. The viewing of it on Netflix has been fantastic, it’s making an impression,” she adds. “The short form being found on Netflix is really exciting to see, with the power of the platform to be able to amplify that kind of story.”

Profound Messages in Succinct Form

Animated shorts Oscar contenders package issues in innovative storytelling

BURROW

Madeline Sharafian

Director Sharafian has been in the process of making "Burrow" all her life, or so it seems. She loved bunnies so much that her childhood nickname was "Rabbit." Then came the opportunity to develop and produce an animated short through Pixar's SparkShorts program.

The resulting film follows a young rabbit on an underground journey to dig the burrow of her dreams. She has no idea what she is doing and, not wanting to be an inconvenience, digs far from the others in the below-earth habitat — so far that she hits rock bottom and has no choice but to accept assistance.

Though about animals, "Burrow" is a very human story. It offers an important message, for both kids and adults, that it is easy to forget when we're isolated from one another: there is no shame in asking for help. — *Haley Bosselman*

GENIUS LOCI

Adrien Mérigeau

Expressed through fluid animation and fast-paced sequences, French helmer Mérigeau says his abstract short film "Genius Loci" doesn't represent anything specifically. The viewer is watching a film with no meaning, just colors and movement. "To me, this way of observing is akin to meditation, and the spirituality that comes with it was connected to what I wanted to talk about in my film," Mérigeau told Animation Scoop.

From the uproar of beeping cars in traffic to the cracks of a broken coffee cup, Mérigeau pays homage to the small



Adrien Mérigeau's "Genius Loci" uses abstract images to convey its ideas.



"If Anything Happens I Love You," streaming on Netflix, poignantly deals with a tragic topic.

details of everyday life. He said one can see beauty everywhere by removing a tangible sense of meaning and just observe. A frequent thought during an ongoing pandemic, "Genius Loci" expresses the idea of embracing the aspects of life that cannot be controlled. "Only when I feel relaxed and true to myself can I allow my surroundings to be chaotic, and I really do love it and I wish I could let go of control much more often." — *Antonio J. Ferme*

IF ANYTHING HAPPENS I LOVE YOU

Will McCormack and Michael Govier

"If Anything Happens I Love You" follows two grieving parents' journey through an emotional void as they mourn their daughter after a school shooting.

The directors say some of their peers initially expressed concern that this story might be too sad to be told through animation. But not too long after it was released, the short film received more than 67 million views on TikTok.

"It was one of the coolest things that has ever happened to me in my entire life," McCormack says.

Govier says he believes the film leaves the viewer with a huge appreciation for life.

"It was an incredible experience to see all these people of all ages just showing up and being vulnerable," Govier says. "At the end, they'll say things like, 'I love my parents, I need to go hug my friends, I want to hug my grandma.'" — *Antonio J. Ferme*

OPERA

Erick Oh

Long-time animator Oh's short film "Opera" was originally intended to be a huge installation art piece, meant to envelope audiences watching the film loop in a physical space. "You walk into a warehouse-like environment and encounter this gigantic, triangle pyramid," Oh says. "You can watch it five, six times, watch with your friends, then discuss it." But because of the pandemic, that version will have to wait.

Thankfully, Oh also created a nine-minute cinematic version. The intricate film, which moves down then back up a pyramid in a single shot, features vignettes representing various aspects of life — the good and the bad. It was influenced by fresco murals and such artists as Bosch, Michelangelo and Dante. "I love what fresco mural paintings do because they capture a significant moment of humanity

and a meaningful part of who we are. I think 'Opera' is also trying to capture where we stand, who we are, where we are." — *Terry Flores*

YES-PEOPLE

Gisli Darri Halldórrsson

Halldórrsson is obsessed with languages and routines, so it's no surprise "Yes-People," which he directed, scopes in on an ordinary day. All living in the same building, an eclectic group of people reveal the gravity of everyday battles.

"[It's] that idea of a small pattern, something that happens during the day, but repeated can have such an impact on your life," Halldórrsson says. "I just feel like this is one of the most important things that people have to deal with."

Over about eight minutes, the characters only ever utter one word: "yes." Halldórrsson sees the choice as a "humble" upgrade to the silent film. What's more, he says, the limited dialogue coupled with the camera hardly moving "makes the characters feel even more stuck."

"We can spiral outwards and grow based on our habits [or] we can spiral inwards and implode," he says. — *Haley Bosselman*



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FEELING
THROUGH

A FILM BY DOUG ROLAND

Human Connections Thread Through Nominees

From the Mideast to the U.S., live-action short films center on the desire to be seen as people • By Shalini Dore



FEELING THROUGH

Doug Roland and Susan Ruzenski

Roland's entry into the deaf-blind community came through a chance meeting about 10 years ago with a man holding up a sign asking for help to cross the street late one night in New York City. He was so struck by the encounter that he wrote the script for "Feeling Through" and completed it in 2019 with the help of the Helen Keller National Center and its new CEO, Ruzenski, who is nominated with him. Authenticity matters to Roland, so he cast Robert Tarango, whom he discovered working in the cafeteria at the HKNC. "I'm really happy that there is some strong disability representation this year," he says, referencing his fellow nominees like "Sound of Metal." He is happy to share his story, "which is ultimately a universal story about the power of human connection despite whatever differences we have."

THE LETTER ROOM

Elvira Lind and Sofia Sondervan

When she heard a podcast about prisoners who were catfished, Lind got the idea for "The Letter Room." She wanted to marry the topics of loneliness and the U.S. prison system, she says. "It gives us a chance to understand the scope of it in a different way without having to tell the big story." Producer Sondervan says she and Lind "plotted it together" and wrote "The Letter Room" script side by side. They finished shooting the short in 2019 just before Lind gave birth to her daughter. Starring Lind's husband, Oscar Isaac, who also produced, "The Letter Room" centers around a guard who censors prisoners' incoming mail. The film was accepted at Holly Shorts, where it screened, and Tribeca, Cannes, Telluride and other festivals where it did not. "We got caught in COVID," Lind says. That was a huge disappointment, but it's been offset by the Academy nomination.

THE PRESENT

Farah Nabulsi

U.K. native Nabulsi has Palestinian roots and "The Present" was born from a visit during which she witnessed Arabs at Israeli checkpoints. A man's purchase of a refrigerator and his struggle to get it home is at the center of her movie. Production in Israel was not easy, with guerrilla shoots at an actual checkpoint for an early scene. Casting was also interesting. One of her actors was cast at the last minute and caused a production delay by oversleeping on the first day of the six-day shoot. While her star was veteran Saleh Bakri, she wanted someone who had his striking blue eyes to play the daughter. Multiple auditions later, she returned to her first choice, her production manager's daughter, Mariam Kanj. "She speaks Arabic like a grandma, which is like perfect," Nabulsi says. She tried out several endings before settling on the one in the

◀
Oscar Isaac stars in and exec produced "The Letter Room."

film. "It is fiction, but it is based on a more absurd reality that does exist on the ground," she says.

TWO DISTANT STRANGERS

Travon Free and Martin Desmond Roe

The impetus for the short was police shootings of Black people. Joey Badass stars as a man who tries to return home after spending the night with his girlfriend, but every time he has a run in with police that ends badly for him. "It started with the thought that this feels like the worst version of 'Groundhog Day' imaginable, and that turned into something that I could probably do something with," says writer and co-director Free. Although their budget was tiny, co-director Roe says they managed to get together a cast and crew when New York reopened after the COVID shutdown and shot it in five days. Keeping to a couple of close locations helped and everyone wanted to participate. "We had one thing going for us, because of the nature of the script, we were repeating scenes, there was some economy there," he says.

WHITE EYE

Tomer Shushan and Shira Hochman

Shushan was on the way to meet with a mentor when he spotted his bike, which had been stolen. "White Eye" was based on that incident, which had a happier ending than the one in his film, he says. In the short, the Eritrean buyer of the stolen bike is taken away by police.

"Everything was very, very fresh from the incident. I just remembered clearly all the details, and all the feelings that I had, and I saw how this story got escalated so quickly because of stupid bikes." He found Dawit Tekelab washing dishes at a Tel Aviv hamburger stand one evening. And despite his never having acted, Shushan found his eyes so compelling that he decided to cast him. "He said, 'I want to do this for my community because this film doesn't put our community and our people in a bad or like a miserable way. It puts us in a place that says, This is us, we have rights, we're human like everyone.' So he really liked that." 

Queer Cinema Comes Out on Global Stage

From 'Two of Us' to 'Funny Boy' and 'Rafiki,' LGBTQ films are contenders at festivals and awards • By Guy Lodge

Introducing a musical performance at the Academy Awards isn't normally the biggest of deals, but for Chilean newcomer Daniela Vega, it was a landmark opportunity: At the 2018 ceremony, she became the first transgender person ever to present at the Oscars. The film that got her there, meanwhile, had already made history that same night. Sebastián Lelio's uplifting drama "A Fantastic Woman," in which Vega gave a luminous performance as a trans woman battling heartbreak and discrimination, won that year's



Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu's "Rafiki" has become a favorite on the fest circuit.

international feature award — becoming the first film with a transgender lead to win an Oscar in any category.

"Thank you so much for this moment," Vega said from the stage, before segueing into a tribute to gay Italian filmmaker Luca Guadagnino's much-nominated queer romance "Call Me by Your Name": It was a minute of airtime that contained more global LGBTQ visibility than many a previous broadcast.

"A Fantastic Woman's" triumph was a clear marker of a rising tide of international LGBTQ cinema, making its

presence felt at festivals, awards ceremonies and arthouses alike: No longer a fringe concern, queer cinema from across the globe appears to cultivate a larger and more diverse audience every year: witness the across-the-board adulation for French director Céline Sciamma's lesbian period romance "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," which took the 2019 Cannes Film Festival by storm and amassed a swooning cult from there.

At that same festival, veteran queer filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's autobiographical "Pain & Glory" became one

of his most broadly acclaimed films, eventually taking \$38 million worldwide (and a couple of Oscar nominations to boot).

Even given the restrictions of a global pandemic, the past year has been a rich and varied one for queer cinema of many stripes, both on the festival circuit and multiple avenues of distribution — with the streaming realm an increasingly vital ally in amplifying LGBTQ film and filmmakers.

This year's international Oscar race hasn't been as kind to queer cinema as



the one that culminated in Lelio's victory: no LGBTQ-themed films made the final five in the category, though several were submitted by their respective countries, with a couple making the pre-nomination shortlist.

Most prominent among those is "Two of Us," an assured, emotionally rich debut from French-based Italian director Filippo Meneghetti, which seeks to rectify the ageism that prevails even in this liberal-minded film sector. A rare portrait of older same-sex romance, its study of a covert, decades-long love affair between two women in the same apartment building is tender and empathetic, but takes some surprising genre turns as their secret is threatened. (As a portrait of everyday lesbian life within the boomer generation, it stands comparison with a Paraguayan festival standout from 2018: Marcelo Martinessi's Berlinale-laureled "The Heiresses.")

If "Two of Us" fell just short with Oscar voters, the French Academy was more generous: Meneghetti won the Cesar for first feature earlier this month, while leads Barbara Sukowa and Martine Chevallier both received actress nods. Merely being selected as France's Oscar entry, meanwhile, entailed beating one of the country's most celebrated queer film-



↑
Kai Luke
Brummer-starred
"Moffie" nabbed
a best British
debut nomination
from BAFTA.

◀
"Two of Us"
helmer Filippo
Meneghetti
accepts the
Cesar Award for
best first movie
last month.

makers to the punch: Francois Ozon's "Summer of '85," a rollicking fusion of gay coming-of-age romance and teen tragedy, was among the films shortlisted and passed over by the French selectors. (It also racked up a formidable 12 Cesar nominations, though left the ceremony empty-handed.)

Joining Meneghetti's film on the international Oscar shortlist was a filmmaker who could hardly be less of a newcomer. Polish-born but well-traveled in terms of film production, Agnieszka Holland helmed the Czech Republic's entry "Charlatan," an absorbing biopic of Communist-persecuted Czech faith healer Jan Mikolášek that is most interesting in its dramatization of Mikolášek's rumored gay romance with his devoted assistant. A quarter-century after her

English-language Leonardo DiCaprio vehicle "Total Eclipse" probed the historical affair between poets Rimbaud and Verlaine, Holland once demonstrates a subtle, sensual understanding of gay male desire in challenging circumstances.

Also shortlisted for the Oscar: gay Guatemalan writer-director Jayro Bustamante, who has almost single-handedly put his country's cinema on the arthouse map with his first three features. (Prior to his 2015 debut "Ixcanul," Bustamante had only once submitted a film in the Oscar race.)

The film that earned the Academy's attention, "La Llorona" — a powerful, politically resonant horror film acting as an allegory for lingering trauma over native Mayan genocide — is not expressly queer in its themes, though Bustamante

shot it back-to-back with an equally potent film that very much is.

Granted a limited U.S. release in late 2019, "Tremors" tells the story of a well-to-do family man vilified by his evangelical Christian community when he belatedly comes out, leaving his wife for a lower-class man. It's a sharp, upsetting portrayal of the challenging realities of LGBTQ life in Guatemala, where homosexuality is legal, but not protected by anti-discrimination laws.

Another study of a family shaken by taboo queerness in its midst, the well-regarded "Funny Boy," from Canadian director Deepa Mehta, had high hopes in the international Oscar race before being disqualified over its proportion of English-language dialogue. Adapted from a best-selling autobiographical novel by Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai, it's a bright, accessible tale of a young boy from a conservative Colombo family, coming to terms with his sexuality as the Sri Lankan civil war brews in the background.

Picked up by Ava DuVernay's diversity-oriented Array distribution company, it achieved wide exposure in the U.S. and other regions via Netflix. It wasn't the only subcontinent-set queer film to find a mainstream audience in 2020. Though India's commerce-driven Bollywood industry largely shies away from LGBTQ themes, Hitesh Kewlani's gay romantic comedy "Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan" was a surprise success, topping the domestic box office before COVID-19 shuttered cinemas the very next week.

Queer self-discovery and political bedfellows are once more narrative

bedfellows in "Moffie," a gut-punching war drama from South Africa's Oliver Hermanus that recently landed a best British debut BAFTA nomination for producer and co-writer Jack Sidey. Set in South Africa's apartheid era, it brings vivid, visceral immediacy to its story of a closeted gay teenager sent to the frontline of the Border War with Angola in the 1980s, examining the violent masculinity that sustained a whole country's history of hate. Hermanus, a Black gay director, previously examined the corrosive effect of same-sex desire on a white Afrikaner man in his Cannes-selected 2011 stunner "Beauty"; "Moffie," which finally gets a U.S. release in April after premiering at Venice in 2019, arguably establishes him as Africa's foremost queer filmmaker.

Still, his isn't the only such voice emerging from a continent where LGBTQ themes are frequently a source of controversy: Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu's youthful, candy-colored lesbian romance "Rafiki" hit headlines in 2018 when it was banned by Kenyan censors for its positive depiction of same-sex romance, but became a global festival favorite.

From the same country, Peter Murimi's stirring documentary "I Am Samuel" depicts the struggle of a rural preacher's son to be with the man he loves in the face of familial and governmental oppression, and was a staple of last year's largely virtual doc festival circuit. It's a modest film that nonetheless makes a seismic statement in the context of its origins — and joins a global chorus of queer voices in the medium that will no longer be sidelined or silent. ↗

Quo Vadis Int'l Film Race?

From frontrunner 'Another Round' to 'Better Days,' voters face embarrassment of riches • By Jessica Kiang



For the past two years, the Academy Award for international feature has been a foregone conclusion. With both "Parasite," and "Roma," the overriding question was which other categories they might take, and in a history-making achievement now wistfully recalled by many as "the last good thing to happen before lockdown," "Parasite" took both the international and best picture awards last year.

This time, none of the international feature nominees snagged a best picture nod, but that doesn't mean there's no frontrunner. Denmark's "Another Round," a beautiful, bittersweet film about a gang of schoolteachers boozily self-medicating through their midlife crises, is the clear favorite, especially after its pleasant-surprise directing nomination for Thomas Vinterberg. For the past 40 years, also getting a director nod has all but guaranteed the international Oscar win, and boosted by the popularity of star Mads Mikkelsen giving one of his best performances, Denmark's fourth international Oscar win is in the cards, and would be hard to begrudge.

From the most widely predicted nomination to the least: Tunisia's first-ever international feature nod comes for the



With a director nom for Thomas Vinterberg, "Another Round" has two Oscar nominations.

comparatively under-the-radar "The Man Who Sold His Skin," the only one of the five films not currently available to the public. Despite an excellent central turn from Yahya Mahayni, Kaouther Ben Hania's film is an uneven, sometimes uneasy mix of art-world satire and refugee drama. So although it's heartening to see an African film in the nominations — this will be only the 10th ever from the entire continent — its appearance is

certainly the category's biggest surprise.

That the sole Asian nomination came for Hong Kong's "Better Days" was unexpected too, albeit less so. Taiwan's shortlisted "A Sun" reportedly made a late surge, especially once it appeared on Netflix. But Derek Tsang's moody, noirish love story, featuring a heartbreaking central performance from actress Zhou Dongyu, is a worthy inclusion, and arguably has an important issues-based edge

in highlighting the troubling phenomenon of bullying in Chinese schools.

But for social commentary, there can be no better candidate than Romania's "Collective," an essential documentary that plays like a procedural thriller investigating medical malfeasance and political mismanagement after a lethal fire in a Bucharest nightclub. Also garnering a nomination for documentary, it is, amazingly, the first international film nomination for Romania, home to one of the most globally respected national cinemas of recent decades. Even if it wins in neither category (and the documentary winners tend overwhelmingly to be English-language titles) the dual nominations for Alexander Nanau's film must surely help it find the broad audience it deserves (it is streaming on Hulu).

And an audience is also building for Bosnia and Herzegovina's harrowing and compassionate "Quo Vadis, Aida?" perhaps giving it the best shot at overtaking "Another Round" in the final assessment. Jasmila Žbanić's film is a riveting account of the Srebrenica massacre, which pivots on a steely, devastating central performance from Jasna Đurić. In a just world, she would have been in the running for acting awards too, but when a category yields three films that would be unimpeachable winners, from an impressive shortlist of 15 that represented the diversity of global cinema far better than previous years, there is cause for celebration — maybe another round? — in the international feature arena in 2021. ↗



"Quo Vadis, Aida?" could challenge the frontrunner, "Another Round."

Nominees Reveal Score Process

Composers discuss their Oscar-nominated aural big-screen storytelling • By Jon Burlingame

Four Vietnam vets return to the place that changed their lives. An alcoholic screenwriter creates a masterpiece. Korean immigrants struggle to succeed on their Arkansas farm. A Civil War vet takes an orphan home. An aspiring jazz pianist discovers his true calling only after his death.

How does music aid the storytelling in each of these films? That's what Academy voters must weigh in deciding this year's Oscar winner for original score.

DA 5 BLOODS

Terence Blanchard received his second Oscar nomination, also for a Spike Lee film (2018's "BlacKkKlansman" was his first), and boasting his largest orchestra to date: 96 players, plus the unusual addition of the duduk, an Armenian woodwind. This is the first year in Oscar history that two African-American composers (Jon Batiste and Blanchard) are nominated for original score.

Says Blanchard: "We wanted to have a really grand sound. When I saw that opening shot with the helicopter flying through the valley, I knew the film was going to be epic and I had to rise to the occasion. We needed something huge, with a lot of different colors. [As for the duduk] I thought a double-reed instrument would be nice for the Asian part of it, and [performer] Pedro Eustache's tone was so haunting in those scenes."

MANK

Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross are nominated for David Fincher's black-and-white film about "Citizen Kane" writer Herman Mankiewicz. This was their first excursion into orchestral music, writing a score that demanded a 1940s-style orchestra and big band.

"It became obvious, that working with an orchestral palette and splitting that with big-band and foxtrot arrangements was the right move," Reznor says. "The challenge really became bringing a level of authenticity to it, and avoiding any of the gimmicky missteps one could make that might cheapen the overall



effect — because we wanted this to feel earnest, to do what the music needed to do for the film without feeling like it was a gimmick."

Adds Ross: "The early experiments that the film's editor did against the picture indicated to us that the big band would probably work for the studio aspect and the orchestra could speak more to the emotional journey that Mank faces in the storyline."

MINARI

Emile Mosseri is the other newcomer to the Oscar competition. Director Lee Isaac Chung set unexpected parameters for his film: no overtly Korean- or American-sounding music, a surprise considering it's about a Korean family farm in rural America.

"It wasn't specifically the immigrant story that we were trying to evoke," Mosseri says. "It was more the idea of

↑
Composer Jon Batiste and "Soul" co-director Pete Docter discuss music for the animated hit.

→
Terence Blanchard wanted a "grand sound" for Spike Lee's "Da 5 Bloods."

synthesizer ("dissonant and unsturdy"), plus his own voice, contribute to the overall sound.

NEWS OF THE WORLD

Meanwhile, veteran James Newton Howard earned his ninth nomination for this Tom Hanks Western (a genre he likes, and which has produced such past musical masterworks as "Wyatt Earp" and "Hidalgo"). He visited the New Mexico location during shooting.

Howard incorporated authentic 19th century instruments (including guitar, banjo, fiddle and harmonica) and a 70-piece orchestra. Director Paul Greengrass, he recalls, "wanted the music to somehow feel broken, jagged, tattered, with a rough-hewn edge to it. ... This is about a man who has deep feelings of guilt and is kind of lost, struggling to get through his life. A gospel-like theme evolved and that was the heart and soul of his music."

SOUL

The Pixar film is the front-runner, considering its earlier Golden Globe and Critics Choice wins, and the fact that so much of the story centers on a New York educator who hopes to turn his passion for jazz into a performing career — that is, until a misstep sends him to the Great Before, which requires an entirely different soundscape.

First-time nominee and "Late Night With Stephen Colbert" bandleader Jon Batiste supplied the earthly jazz (and animators used his hands as models for those of character Joe Gardner), while Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross — past winners for their "Social Network" score — added the mystical, entirely synthesized, music for the beyond-Earth scenes.

Says Batiste: "It was really speaking to the heroes of the jazz lineage that I had the pleasure of playing with. I wanted to find a way to capture something that was contemporary, that spontaneity and sense of surprise without it feeling like an archaic form. And then there's also a spirit of the celestial that taps into my collaboration with Trent and Atticus, inspiration from spiritual music of all different genres." ↗



Song Race Serves Up Drama

Diane Warren returns as a contender in field of worthy tunes • By Jon Burlingame

Everyone in the music business is wondering the same thing: Could veteran songwriter Diane Warren, denied the Oscar 11 times over the past 33 years, finally win on her 12th try?

Warren, whose movie songs range from Celine Dion's "Because You Loved Me" to Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing," penned "Io Si (Seen)" for Netflix's "The Life Ahead." Sung in Italian by co-lyricist Laura Pausini, it could become only the fourth foreign-language song to win an Oscar.

But it's far from a sure thing. Only one song ("Husavik" from "Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga") is actually performed during the film itself, and that can be a potent factor for voters; and the other three relate to the social-justice issues of the 1960s that continue to be relevant today. All but Warren are first-time nominees.

Fight for You

FROM "JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH"

Invoking a '70s soul sound for the finale of the Fred Hampton story, recent Grammy winner H.E.R. (who co-wrote with Dernst Emile II and Tiara Thomas) sings "Their guns don't play fair, all we got is a prayer/It was all in their plans, wash the blood from your hands" — echoing the tragic death of the Black Panther leader, yet still managing to be an up-tempo song with a groove.

H.E.R. told *Variety*: "There's not much that separates that time and that story from what's going on right now in the Black Lives Matter movement. Creatively,

I wanted to create a universal message, representing that fight that is still happening today, that connects with two generations, how we're passing the torch and continuing Fred Hampton's work."

Hear My Voice

FROM "THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7"

Director Aaron Sorkin wanted an end-title song that "suggested there's a light at the end of the tunnel" despite the film's downbeat, guilty-verdict finale, says composer Daniel Pemberton. He contacted Celeste, the emerging English soul singer, late in the scoring process, and the two collaborated on the lyrics.

"What was amazing about it is, we finished that song and the world around us changed," Pemberton says. "It's been such a crazy year. This song, that was originally written for events in 1968, suddenly the lyrics take on a whole different meaning. They have just as much impact for what's happening right now: people being denied their voice."

Husavik

FROM "EUROVISION SONG CONTEST: THE STORY OF FIRE SAGA"

"Husavik" is the sole comedic song and the only one actually sung on-screen (and partly in Icelandic). Will Ferrell mimes at the piano and Rachel McAdams lip-syncs to Swedish pop singer Molly Sandén's vocal. The tune soars, but the lyric ("where the whales can live 'cause they're gentle people") is the giveaway that this is a sendup.

Says Savan Kotecha (co-writer with Fat Max Gsus and Rickard Göransson): "When I watched Eurovision, it always



Diane Warren's "Io Si (Seen)" is the first song she's written for a foreign-language movie.

felt like the lyrics were sort of Google-translated into English. But we wanted to make the melodies really, really strong. [We thought] then we can get away with lyrics being ridiculous, and no one's gonna really notice unless they look into it."

Io Si (Seen)

FROM "THE LIFE AHEAD"

Screen veteran Warren, who has written dozens of songs for movies since the 1980s, wrote this touching, gentle ballad for the finale of Sophia Loren's screen comeback. Warren's English lyrics were translated into Italian and slightly augmented by singer Laura Pausini.

"It's the first time I've written a song for a foreign movie," says Warren. "What struck me was I saw the word 'seen' and I thought of the characters. The boy is this criminal kid and she's a former prostitute and they're living on the outside. No one really sees them, and through their relationship, they truly see each other and love one another."

Speak Now

FROM "ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI"

Accompanied by a '60s-appropriate acoustic guitar and Hammond B3 organ, Leslie Odom Jr. (who co-wrote with Sam Ashworth) sings of "the message of hope and the whispers of ghosts" — not in Sam Cooke's voice, but rather his own, reminding audiences that the debate of the film (among Cooke, Muhammad Ali, James Brown and Malcolm X) remains unfinished.

Odom was concerned that the end-title song would come soon after Cooke sings "A Change Is Gonna Come" in the film. Says the actor-songwriter: "The first question we asked ourselves was: Has that change come, and if it has, for whom? In taking an honest look at where we are. ... I think it's undeniable that some of that change has come. But I think that [Cooke] would also say, 'It's not finished. So, what are you doing about that? The change hasn't come? OK, well, get to work.'"



Daniel Pemberton and Celeste wrote "Hear My Voice" for "The Trial of the Chicago 7."



Sundance Helps Birth Nonfiction Awards Contenders

From politics to nature, Oscar-nominated docs cover the spectrum • By Andrew Barker

Culled from a record-smashing 238 eligible films, the Oscar's doc branch has finally delivered its five final nominees for documentary feature: Alexander Nanau's "Collective," Nicole Newham and James Lebrecht's "Crip Camp," Maite Alberdi's "The Mole Agent," Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed's "My Octopus Teacher" and Garrett Bradley's "Time." From a nature doc to an unusual detective tale to a prismatic look at American incarceration, what could these five films possibly have in common? Some takeaways below.

↑
"Crip Camp" made its debut at Sundance 2020 and has been drawing attention since.

PARK CITY EXPRESS

Always an important incubator for nonfiction filmmaking, this year the Sundance Film Festival was unusually key in dictating the conversation around the documentary race, screening four of the five nominees in January 2020. "Time," which won the fest's directing award; "Crip Camp," an audience award winner; and "The Mole Agent" all world-premiered in Park City, which also hosted the American premiere of "Collective." (Shortlisted films "Dick Johnson Is Dead," "Boys State" and "Welcome to Chechnya" were also in that year's lineup.) Sundance 2020 has

an unusual distinction as one of the last major festivals to be held in pre-pandemic conditions, which surely gave those films a stronger buzz than those saddled with virtual fall fest premieres. And its prominence in the field is hardly new: last year's Oscar winner ("American Factory") came from the fest, as did recent nominees including "Minding the Gap" and "Hale County This Morning, This Evening." But its near dominance of the documentary category in 2021, combined with the fact that it also launched three best picture nominees ("Promising Young Woman," "The Father," "Minari") will surely give festival programmers an extra spring in their step, after several

years in which the connection between Park City buzz and awards season glory seemed to be growing more tenuous.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Lenin's famous dictum that "there are decades when nothing happens, and weeks when decades happen" sometimes felt like it was coined with 2020 in mind, as the past year saw news headlines that would typically be era-defining events come and go on an almost hourly basis.

From the pandemic to culture-shifting protest movements to a cataclysmic presidential election (and an attempt to overturn it), it was a year in which

just about everything that could have happened did, and there were plenty of documentaries that followed the year's biggest headlines. From the pandemic ("76 Days," "Totally Under Control") to the U.S. election ("All In: The Fight for Democracy"), the roots of political division ("Boys State," "The Social Experiment"), ongoing sexual abuse scandals ("Athlete A," "On the Record") and some of the biggest international news developments of the past few years ("The Dissident," "Assassins," "Welcome to Chechnya," "Notturno"), several of 2020's timeliest nonfiction films failed to make the final cut. (This is one of the rare years that zero feature documentaries about war — either modern or historical — made the nominations.)

Which is not to say that the five nominees are somehow apolitical or divorced from current events — quite the opposite, in fact. But in each case, voters seemed most receptive to films that tackled big issues in slightly skewed, microcosmic or personal ways. "Time" may be the best example: the film is intensely political, driven by hard questions about American long-term incarceration, the opacity of the legal system, and the disproportionate burdens that both place on Black Americans, but it tackles the issues entirely through the eyes of a single woman whose life is profoundly affected by them.

"The Mole Agent," easily the most playful doc on the list, raises important questions about treatment of the elderly through an unexpected angle; likewise the gorgeously shot, accessible "My Octopus Teacher," which can't help but underline the fragility of underwater wildlife habitats in its tale of a diver who develops an unusual bond with an octopus.

"Crip Camp" tackles a movement that still plays a very active role in American life — the disability rights movement — through the lens of the single 1970s summer camp that helped birth it. And perhaps none of the nominees have had as immediate an effect on the real world as "Collective," whose account of governmental mismanagement and corruption in the wake of a disastrous nightclub fire put huge pressure on the country's



leadership — and within this film's focus on Romania's individual woes, surely many voters saw uneasy echoes of the rot within other world governments.

OUT OF THE BOX

One of the more frustrating historical quirks of the Academy has been its long tendency to shutter documentaries — much like animated features — into their own cloistered category, without considering documentary filmmakers among the editing, directing and, foremost, best picture categories. While no documentary has ever been nominated for best picture, the increasing consideration of documentaries in the international film category does show signs that some of the walls are breaking down. As in 2020, when Macedonia's "Honeyland" managed to snag nominations for documentary and international feature, this year Romania's "Collective" secured noms in both categories, while Chile's nominated "The Mole Agent" and Italy's shortlisted doc "Notturno" were submitted in both. Baby steps, perhaps, but hopefully the lesson that documentaries are films,

↑ Maite Alberdi's "The Mole Agent" was also shortlisted for the international feature Oscar.

→ "Collective," directed by Alexander Nanau, is the first Romanian film to be nominated for both doc and international film Oscars.



period, will start to sink in with voters, and we'll see standout docs make their way into the Oscars' marquee categories before too long.

TURNING ON THE STYLE

Aside from being cut off from the awards conversation in categories dominated by fiction filmmaking, one of the most consistent complaints about the Oscars' approach to documentaries has been that voters are less receptive to formally daring work, opting instead for films that value straightforward reportage and easily accessible storytelling. But that seems to be changing as well, with experimentally minded films including "Hale County" and "Faces Places" getting love from voters in recent years, and a number of 2020's nominees pushed the form in interesting directions.

Bradley's work on time "Time" did bold things with structure, using an intuitive approach to collage that took years of the self-shot home video from its subject, Fox Rich, and jumps backward and forward in time to create a

powerfully dreamlike portrait of her life.

Alberdi's work with "The Mole Agent" is more subtle, as she takes what initially seems like a shaggy dog story (an elderly "detective" goes undercover at a nursing home) and plays up the story's quirker elements in the earlygoing, all the better to spring its heavier themes of loneliness and neglect on the viewer.

"Crip Camp" directors Newham, who previously won an Emmy for new approaches to documentary in her TV work, and Lebrecht, a one-time attendee of the camp depicted in the film, may have been working in a more traditional mode, but their understanding of the malleability of the documentary form shows through in their refusal to steer the film toward easy catharsis or predictable paces.

In "Collective," Nanau displays incredible skill presenting a massively complex scandal in a manner both comprehensible and emotionally affecting, while "Octopus" Ehrlich and Reed are never

Experimentally minded films, including "Hale County" and "Faces Places" are getting love from voters in recent years and a number of 2020's nominees pushed the form in interesting directions.

afraid to complicate the more crowd-pleasing elements of their film (and its "Blue Planet"-quality underwater photography) with some bracing truths. Though not nominated, shortlisted entries such as dialogue-less farm life doc "Gunda" and the unexpectedly fanciful "Dick Johnson Is Dead" also brought innovative, creative approaches into the doc mainstream, and landed squarely in the Academy's sights.

FIRST TIME'S THE CHARM

Unlike so many other Academy branches, the documentary branch has long displayed an aversion to repeat winners and famous names, and this year has been no exception, with only three previous Oscar nominees making it onto the 15-film shortlist, and none of them making the final cut. But when the process results in adventurous under-the-radar filmmakers such as Nanau and Bradley catapulting to mainstream attention, or first-time feature film directors including Ehrlich and Lebrecht vying for American film's highest honor, it's tough to complain. ↗

Rookies Dominate Doc Shorts Category

Race covers wide range of societal traumas • By Andrew Barker

Often one of the Oscars' most fascinating under-the-radar categories, the documentary short subject field has always provided a glimpse of some of the more-unique voices and subject matter bubbling up outside the more endlessly discussed feature film races, and this year's nominees are no exception. With four of the five films coming from first-time Oscar nominees, the shorts selected cover a wide swath of subjects — the lingering trauma of long-ago wars and the dire urgency of ongoing conflicts; racism at its most violent and racism at its most insidiously subtle; and the changing face of global protest movements. All five films are easily available to stream.

Colette

ANTHONY GIACCHINO

Giacchino's film follows the titular nonagenarian as she recalls her time as a teenage agent of the French Resistance during WWII, and visits — for the first time — the German concentration camp where her older brother was killed after

→
Anders Hammer's "Do Not Split" surveys a year in Hong Kong's protest movement.

↓
"A Love Song for Latasha" from Sophia Nahali Allison recounts the person behind the headlines.

being arrested by the Nazis. Produced by Facebook's Oculus Studios (the first Oscar nom for the social-media giant) and released by the Guardian newspaper, the film is understandably somber and sad but imbued with great grace, as Colette forms a bond with a high school student who accompanies her on the trip and draws out her story.

A Concerto Is a Conversation

BEN PROUDFOOT AND KRIS BOWERS

Produced through the New York Times' Op-Docs series, this crowd-pleaser spotlights rising composer and film scorer Bowers, and his grandfather, on the eve of the premiere of his concerto "To My Younger Self" at L.A.'s Disney Concert Hall. Structured as a piece of music, the film draws gentle parallels between the two men as they discuss their lives, with the older Bowers detailing his flight from segregation-era Florida and subsequent battle to establish an L.A. dry cleaning business in spite of de facto racism, while the younger man reflects on his journey into a realm that has not always been entirely hospitable to Black composers.



Do Not Split

ANDERS HAMMER

The longest of the nominated films, Hammer's pic covers an entire year of developments in the massive Hong Kong protests against restrictive new laws from the Chinese government. A startlingly immersive account that rarely leaves the ground level, even during the most intense clashes between demonstrators and police, the film is both

impassioned and clear-eyed about the challenges Hong Kongers face, especially as the pandemic brings the movement's momentum to a pause.

Hunger Ward

SKYE FITZGERALD

The third film in Fitzgerald's trilogy exploring refugee and humanitarian crises in the Middle East and North Africa (following "50 Feet From Syria" and "Lifeboat," the latter nominated for a short film Oscar), "Hunger Ward" shines a light on the often-ignored plight of Yemeni civilians in the country's brutal, ongoing conflict, centered on two women (a doctor and a nurse) as they battle the epidemic of starvation that has ravaged the nation. Executive produced by Mark Ruffalo, the filmmakers have used the short as a springboard to raise awareness of the crisis.

A Love Song for Latasha

SOPHIA NAHALI ALLISON

In this elegiac work, Allison revisits the 1991 shooting death of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins at the hands of a liquor store owner. The fatal shooting lit a fuse in South Los Angeles that would later explode into open hostilities between L.A.'s Black and Korean communities during the riots a year later. Rather than simply retell the story of this flashpoint, however, Allison's film aims to restore a sense of humanity to Harlins herself, allowing her cousin and best friend to share memories of a girl who demonstrated extraordinary resilience, ambition and generosity in her short life, before tragedy gave her a sad place in the history books. ↗



Aaron Sorkin's Love Letter to Patriotism

'Chicago 7' is set in 1968 but is all about today

By Tim Gray



GRAY'S GOLD

Though it's set 50 years ago, "The Trial of the Chicago 7" is contemporary and important. Writer-director Aaron Sorkin tells *Variety*, "Even from the beginning, I didn't want the film to be about 1968, I wanted it to be about today. None of us realized how much about today it would end up being."

Sorkin spoke about the parallels to our times in the film, which earned six Oscar noms, including best picture. While

"Chicago 7" addresses heavy-duty topics, Sorkin says if someone hasn't seen it, "I want them to know they will leave it feeling good. This is a valentine to patriotism and to protest."

Biden's victory gave momentary hope that our problems might be ending, but the film seems more urgent than ever. On Jan. 20, some problems did go away. The biggest problem is that tens of millions of Americans firmly believe things that simply aren't true and refuse to believe things that are, whether it's the winner of an election or whether there is a deadly virus going around. Other problems like systemic racism didn't go away on Jan. 20. This is a country founded on protest — and for the following 250 years or so, every important change was preceded by civil protest.

Americans are ambivalent: We love the Boston Tea Party but seem to hate modern protests.

That idea of "America, love it or leave it" was a big inspiration for doing the film. Audiences are responding to the

↑
"The Trial of the Chicago 7" director Aaron Sorkin wanted audiences to see the parallel between the protests then and contemporary politics.

patriotism of protest, that if you're taking a knee during the national anthem, you're not saying you hate America. Today, it's widely accepted that the Chicago 7, and the thousands who protested with them, hastened the end of the war. But at the time they were called unpatriotic, un-American, overly educated, spoiled, weak. They were anything but weak. They risked their lives, they risked 10 years in federal prison for their beliefs.

Jan. 6 this year was like a dark mirror image of the Chicago protests.

It sure was. Not just Donald Trump, but Rudy Giuliani and others stood at microphones and did exactly what the Chicago 7 were on trial for doing. But the Jan. 6 people were insurgents; I'm not sure it's right to call them protesters. There's a big difference between protesting and attacking.

Does anything shock you?

Almost everything these days shocks me. What shocks me most is how weak our congressmen and senators are; they won't do the right thing. Of course I'm shocked

by the last four years of life in America under Donald Trump. I'm shocked by the lying, the gaslighting. The easiest thing in the world is for one parent to identify with another parent. No matter who you are, you think 'I'm a parent, and if you're a parent, I know a lot about you.' That was shattered when we started separating families at the border, taking kids from their parents.

In the film, William Kunstler says, "There's no such thing as a political trial." But the movie makes clear, there are political trials.

That's right and it shocked Kunstler. It was a 5½-month trial, so we couldn't cover everything in the film. But Kunstler became undone during this trial for exactly that reason. He thought juries may get it wrong from time to time, but in a courtroom — with equality, justice, the rules and the protections — things work the way they're supposed to. But they didn't in this courtroom, at all. That reflects how we've all felt in the last four years, that nothing was working the way it was supposed to. 



The Show Will Go On

SAG Awards producers offers a glimpse into the pre-taped and scaled-down ceremony • *By Michael Schneider*

SAG Awards executive producer Kathy Connell likes to refer to the annual ceremony as “the actors’ party in the actors’ house.” But in 2021, she means it literally: “This year, it’s really in their house!”

That’s because the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Screen Actors Guild Awards (9 p.m. ET/6 p.m. PT April 4 on TNT and TBS) to not only go virtual, but also to do something that’s usually a

non-starter for top-tier televised honors: Shrink to a completely pre-taped one-hour special. There will be no red carpet, no host and no set — so everything will take place from wherever the actors are.

“It became clear that people were going to stay in pods and need to stay safe,” Connell says. “And so, we looked at it and asked, ‘Is this a year to do a full celebration when everybody’s suffering as they are?’ But at the same time, we wanted to acknowledge the great performances that are entertaining us.”

What a difference a year makes: The “Parasite” cast was able to accept their SAG Ensemble Award in person at the 26th annual ceremony in January 2020.



The COVID-19 pandemic has already led several other major kudocasts to rethink how events are done — some to high marks (such as the Emmys and Grammys), and others to critical pans (ahem, the Golden Globes). Those shows were still broadcast live, however — which led to some awkward moments during the Globes. For Connell and fellow executive producers Todd Milliner and Sean Hayes, the decision was to keep things short, sweet and pre-produced.

“We’re smack in the middle of awards season and we think a lot of people are going to be doing shows that look a little similar, in trying to manage the live component,” Milliner says. “We decided to do a completely pre-recorded hour to celebrate in a different way and to capitalize on a lot of stuff that the SAG Awards have been doing for a long time like ‘I Am an Actor.’”

That means digging deeper into that segment, in which actors share a funny, or sometimes touching, story about



Chris Pizzello/AP Images

how they got into the business — ending with the triumphant statement, “I Am an Actor.”

“Some of the performers we’ve asked to really expand on their experience of being an actor and especially what it means to be an actor right now,” Milliner says.

In recent weeks, the producers have sent crews to presenters including Sterling K. Brown (“This Is Us”), Lily Collins (“Emily in Paris”), Daveed Diggs (“Snowpiercer,” “The Good Lord Bird,” “Hamilton”), Ted Danson (“Mr. Mayor”) and Mary Steenburgen (“Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist”), while others may still have to record themselves if they’re in a production bubble and respecting the protocols.

“It’s going to be a really, really small crew when we send them,” Milliner says. “Everybody’s tested and we’re keeping it very safe. It’s very important.”

As for the 13 categories revealed on the telecast, nominated actors will be brought together in a Zoom-like virtual room. They’ll then be told who the winner is, and that person will give their acceptance speech.

“It gives them a sense of the community, not the full community, but at least some of the people in their own categories and they get to salute them,” Connell says.

As a SAG Award-winning actor himself, Hayes says it was important to keep that element of kinship in the show, even if it is taped days in advance.

“That’s what the show has always been about, it’s honoring your peers,” he says. “It would be a terrible thing if that wasn’t made to happen, so I’m happy that’s going to stay true.”

The producers know there’s a risk in revealing the names winners to nominees a few days before the telecast, but they’re hoping the performers (and their reps!) respect the show, the audience and their fellow nominees and agree not to spill the beans beforehand.

Of course, with all those prizes and everything else they have planned — not to mention commercials — it’s going to take some crafty editing to get the SAG Awards in at under an hour.

Hazy Mills partners Milliner and Hayes first partnered with Connell last year to reimagine the show, which they did by cutting the host, adding more pre-taped comedy bits and giving a new spin to “I Am an Actor.”

This time, not only are the producers facing the challenge of giving the ceremony its most extreme makeover ever in its history — but they still also have to fulfill the goal of both being entertaining and properly honoring this year’s top acting performances.

“We’ve made Kathy watch TikTok,” quips Milliner.

Hayes says he wants to keep acceptance speeches intact, but at least with a pre-tape, the producers will know exactly how long those remarks are, and be able to work around them.



“I think one of the main reasons anybody tunes into the show is to hear the speeches and the kind of emotion that goes behind them,” he says. “And so we’re not going to skimp on those, as they’re one of the most important parts of the show. It’s thrilling to see the person go through that process in front of you.”

Milliner says the telecast will save time by cutting the winners’ walks on and off the stage, and by keeping transitions tight. Actually, the first thing to go was having a stage of any sort.

“Right off the bat when we knew we had an hour, we knew we had to get rid

of that,” Milliner says. “It’s the easiest thing to cut because we don’t want to cut the speeches. We don’t want to cut the ‘I Am an Actor.’ We don’t want to cut ‘In Memoriam.’ So we thought, how can we get the best bang for our buck in this hour?”

Connell says eliminating a stage or set was also a safety precaution. “You have a stage, now you have people together. We really wanted to make sure that our members felt comfortable because they have to go work.”

Meanwhile, Milliner teases big plans for the opening: “Because if we’ve shown anything with last year, we’re going to

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Daveed Diggs (here with America Ferrera) presented at last year’s SAG Awards, announced this year’s nominees, of whom he is one, and will present remotely at this year’s ceremony.

have a really special beginning. You’ve got to open and close strongly, and we’re working on making sure that it is a fun quick night filled with hope. That’s our whole mission.”

But putting the show together will be a lot like playing Tetris.

“I think it’s kind of a fun challenge, weirdly,” Milliner says. “We’re getting to do something way different and Lord knows after going through this this year, I can’t wait until next year. It’s going to feel like we have seven hours next year.”

Adds Hayes: “As challenging as it is I think it’s actually going to turn out to be a great thing.”

This year’s SAG Awards, which had been moved to March 14, shifted again to April 4 after the Grammys took that date. That puts the telecast on Easter evening, but Connell believes more people will be home as a result.

“Having celebrated the festivities earlier in the day, they’ll get to sit down and have an hour of, hopefully, laughter,” she says.

And as a bonus, Connell notes that when the telecast airs, it will have already been locked — which means the producers can actually catch it as viewers like everyone else.

“This will be the first time that I have a glass in my hand and get to sit on my own couch and watch,” she says. ↗

“

One of the main reasons anybody tunes into the show is to hear the speeches and the kind of emotion that goes behind them. And so we’re not going to skimp on those.” — Sean Hayes

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Coastal Fest Goes al Fresco With Drive-In Screenings

Santa Barbara's free outdoor unspoolings complement online presence • By Todd Longwell



→
"Daughters of the Waves," a documentary directed by Lisa Monin and Sébastien Daguerressar, will get its world premiere at the Santa Barbara Intl. Film Festival.



Early on during the pandemic, it became obvious to Santa Barbara Intl. Film Festival executive director Roger Durling that the 36th edition of the festival would be like no other, and not in a good way. But he was hoping that by pushing the event back more than three months from mid-January to spring 2021, he'd be able to mount a hybrid event with some form of indoor screenings.

When that became unfeasible, he pivoted to a seated, socially distanced outdoor event at a Santa Barbara park. Build-out plans were drawn up and budgets were calculated. Then California experienced a dramatic surge in COVID-19 cases in November, and it became clear that the city would never approve their permit request.

"For 24 hours, I was pretty distraught," recalls Durling. Then someone suggested turning the parking lots at Santa Barbara City College into a drive-in, "and all of a sudden it became super-exciting. It's right on the ocean, with quite a spectacular view. And that felt optimistic and festive."

The parking lots have been outfitted with a pair of stadium-size LED screens that SBIFF will use to unspool more than

80 films to viewers in socially distanced autos free of charge (but with reservations required) during the fest's March 31 to April 10 run. Those unable to attend in-person will be able to view the festival's lineup, which includes 47 world premieres and 37 U.S. premieres from 45 countries, online with the purchase of a ticket or a festival pass.

The fest will kick off with the March 31 opening-night premiere of director Aaron Maurer's documentary "Invisible Valley," which follows a diverse collection of people in California's Coachella Valley, from young music festivalgoers to undocumented farmworkers, over the

course of a year. It will close on April 10 with a program of documentary shorts by local Santa Barbara filmmakers exploring such subjects as the Chumash people's annual trip to their historic village and a woman's efforts to restore ecosystems with her flock of sheep.

The films will get a minimum of one free drive-in screening and be available for streaming for the entire 10 days of the festival. However, there are limitations: some titles will have geo-locks allowing access only in certain regions (e.g., the U.S. or California), and once viewers start a movie, they'll have a 48-hour window to watch it.

A lot of the bigger films wanted to be in-person only. But obviously they came around because there was no other option." —Mickey Duzdevich

↑
"Invisible Valley," a documentary about the Coachella Valley, will receive its world premiere on opening night of the festival.

"A lot of the bigger films wanted to be in-person only," says SBIFF senior programmer Mickey Duzdevich. "But, obviously, they came around because there was no other option."

SBIFF events have long been considered an important stop on the run-up to the Academy Awards, and this year the fest presciently picked several honorees who wound up receiving Oscar nominations, including three of the five up for lead actress — Vanessa Kirby ("Pieces of a Woman"), Andra Day ("The United States vs. Billie Holiday") and Carey Mulligan ("Promising Young Woman"), who'll be receiving the Cinema Vanguard Award — along with Riz Ahmed (lead actor, "Sound of Metal"), Amanda Seyfried (supporting actress, "Mank") and Sacha Baron Cohen (adapted screenplay, "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm"; supporting actor, "The Trial of the Chicago 7").

Other honorees include Bill Murray (Maltin Modern Master Award, April 2) and Delroy Lindo (American Riviera Award, April 8), along with Maria Bakalova, Kingsley Ben-Adir, Sidney Flanigan, Tahar Rahim and Zendaya, who will be joining Ahmed, Day and Kirby as honorees at the Virtuoso Awards on April 3.

The fest will also host *Variety*'s seventh annual Artisans Awards on April 5, honoring editor Alan Baumgarten; supervising sound editor Nicolas Becker; costume designer Alexandra Byrne; production designer Donald Graham Burt and set decorator Jan Pascale; VFX supervisor Sean Faden; hair department head Mia Neal; songwriter-actor Leslie Odom Jr.; cinematographer Joshua James Richards; and composers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. They are all scheduled to participate in a conversation moderated by Jazz Tangcay, *Variety* senior artisans editor.

Due to the pandemic, none of the honorees will be attending in-person. Instead, they'll participate from their respective locations via Zoom. But the good news is that the SBIFF crew are already experienced hands when it comes to remote video teleconferencing, having used it for cast and crew Q&As for some 60 screenings since their year-round film program (normally held at the Riviera Theater) was forced to go virtual in March 2020.

As depressing as this might seem in the short-term, it could work to the advantage of SBIFF and other fests going forward, because the pandemic has made both audiences and honorees more accepting of remote participation. It's thus more feasible for the fest to engage people stuck on remote film shoots or otherwise unable to attend in-person.

And that's not the only upside, according to Durling.

"There's a certain degree of intimacy I've found interviewing Zoom," says Durling. "You don't have other distractions, so you're able to zero-in and focus." 

Fest Highlights Range From Starry Tributes to Industry Panels

Bill Murray and Sacha Baron Cohen are among this year's honorees

"Invisible Valley"

OPENING NIGHT FILM
8 P.M. MARCH 31

Aaron Maurer's documentary about Coachella Valley will make its world premiere with a virtual screening for the festival. The movie spotlights undocumented farmworkers, wealthy snowbirds and music fest attendees over the course of a year in the desert region east of Los Angeles.

Bill Murray

MALTIN MODERN MASTER AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 2

The fest will pay tribute to Murray, Golden Globe-nominated for his supporting turn in Sofia Coppola's "On the Rocks," and his career, dating to his breakthrough on "Saturday Night Live" in the 1970s to starring roles in blockbusters such as "Ghostbusters" and "Groundhog Day."

Producers Panel

PANELISTS
11 A.M. APRIL 3

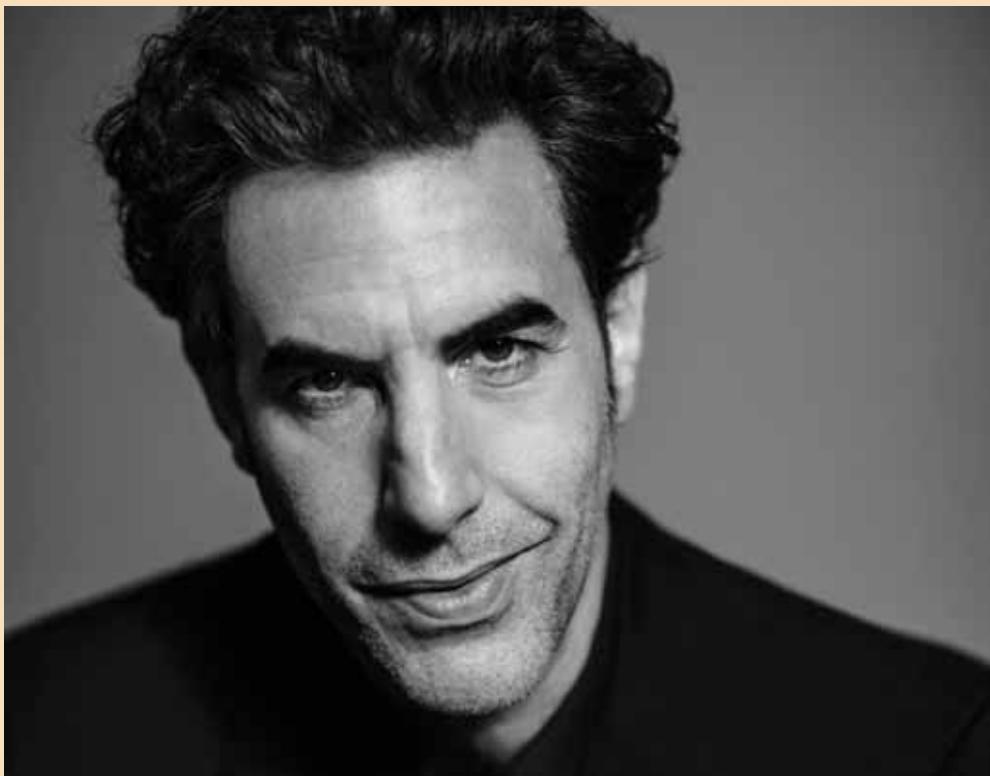
Producers discuss the state of the industry.

Riz Ahmed, Maria Bakalova, Kingsley Ben-Adir, Andra Day, Sidney Flanigan, Vanessa Kirby, Tahar Rahim and Zendaya

VIRTUOSOS AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 3

Online streamed conversation with eight talents from lauded films, including four Oscar nominees: "Sound of Metal" star Ahmed, "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" breakout Bakalova, "The United States vs. Billie Holiday" star Day and "Pieces of a Woman's" Kirby. "One Night in Miami" star Ben-Adir, "Never Rarely Sometimes

→
Double Oscar nominee Sacha Baron Cohen will receive the entertainer of the year award during a virtual tribute at the coastal fest.



Always" breakout Flanigan, "The Mauritanian's" Rahim and Zendaya, of "Malcolm & Marie" and recent Emmy winner for "Euphoria," round out the starry group.

Carey Mulligan

CINEMA VANGUARD AWARD
2 P.M. APRIL 5

Online conversation with the Oscar-nominated lead of "Promising Young Woman," previously nommed for "An Education" (2009). Her roles stretch back to Kitty Bennet in Joe Wright's 2005 adaptation of "Pride & Prejudice."

Alan Baumgarten, Nicolas Becker, Alexandra Byrne, Sean Faden, Graham Burt and Jan Pascale, Mia Neal, Leslie Odom Jr., Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, and Joshua James Richards

VARIETY ARTISANS AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 5

Variety senior artisans editor Jazz Tangcay will moderate an online discussion with 11 Oscar nominees, including Baumgarten (editing, "The Trial of the Chicago 7"), Becker (sound, "Sound of Metal"), Byrne (costume design, "Emma"), Faden (VFX, "Mulan"), Burt and Pascale (production design, "Mank"), Neal (hair and makeup, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"), Odom (song and supporting actor, "One Night in Miami"), Reznor and Ross (original score, "Mank" and "Soul") and Richards (cinematography, "Nomadland").

Sacha Baron Cohen

PERFORMER OF THE YEAR AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 7

Cohen was Oscar-nominated for two films this year: for his supporting turn as Abbie Hoffman in "The Trial of the Chicago 7" and for "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" in the adapted screenplay category. The British multihyphenate previously received an Oscar nom for

the screenplay of the original "Borat" movie and broke through Stateside with his Ali G character.

Delroy Lindo

AMERICAN RIVIERA AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 8

Lindo, who has credits beginning in 1974, received some of the strongest reviews of his career for his powerful performance in Spike Lee's "Da 5 Bloods." The British actor previously worked with Lee on "Malcolm X" and "Crooklyn"; his memorable performances include "Get Shorty."

Amanda Seyfried

MONTECITO AWARD
6 P.M. APRIL 9

Seyfried received her first Oscar nomination for her sparkling performance as Marion Davies in "Mank." The fest will pay online tribute to a career that includes starring roles in "Mamma Mia!" and "Les Miserables."



←
Bill Murray will be feted with the Maltin Modern Master award during an online tribute.

Artisans Get Ready for Their Closeups

Variety honors the below-the-line best at the Santa Barbara Int'l Film Festival



←
Honoree
Alexandra
Byrne
designed the
costumes
for "Emma."



ALAN BAUMGARTEN

For "The Trial of the Chicago 7," Baumgarten seamlessly worked with director and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin as he intercut between the protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the trial of the leaders of those protests and other events during that time period. He says the structure was in Sorkin's intricate script. "I could have stayed in the courtroom and watched the drama unfold there, but Aaron chose to jump out."

He notes the archival footage seen in the Oscar-nominated film was an afterthought.

Baumgarten is nominated for an ACE Eddie and an Oscar for "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

He won an Emmy for 2008's "Recount," starring John Hurt and Laura Dern, and shared an Academy Award nomination with Crispin Struthers and Jay Cassidy for 2013's "American Hustle."



NICOLAS BECKER

Supervising sound editor Becker earned an Oscar nomination as well as a BAFTA nom for his work on Amazon Studio's "Sound of Metal."

He tinkered with sound design for the film, about a rock drummer who loses his hearing, a year before filming even began. And one of the first things he did was to immerse himself and director Darius Marder in an anechoic chamber, which absorbs all noise. "When you're in it, you start hearing the sound of your tendons and the blood flowing through your body," he says. And that was his way into creating the soundscape for the film and the vivid way that the audience shares the experience of what Riz Ahmed's Ruben goes through as he starts to lose his hearing.

Variety's Artisans Awards celebrate below-the-line talent at the heart of filmmaking, and this year, the seventh edition of the honors once again unspools at the Santa Barbara Int'l Film Festival but this time, virtually, on April 5.

"What I've always loved about the Variety Artisans Awards is that it reminds us of the film's integral aspect of collaboration," says Santa Barbara festival executive director Roger Durling. "In a year in which we were separated, it is essential to celebrate the spirit of community."

Those being honored are editor Alan Baumgarten ("The Trial of the Chicago 7"), sound designer Nicolas Becker ("Sound of Metal"), costume designer Alexandra Byrne ("Emma"), visual-effects supervisor Sean Faden ("Mulan"), production designer Donald Graham Burt and set decorator Jan Pascale ("Mank"), makeup head Mia Neal ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"), songwriters Leslie Odom Jr. and Sam Ashworth ("One Night in Miami"), composers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross ("Mank" and "Soul") and cinematographer Joshua James Richards ("Nomadland"). Jazz Tangcay, Variety's senior artisans editor, will moderate a virtual conversation with all the recipients after the presentations.

"It is so wonderful that the Santa Barbara film festival and Variety have created this space to recognize such a wide spectrum of filmmakers and projects," Faden says. "I think it is inspiring to everyone out there who want to be a part of the filmmaking process but just aren't sure where they would fit in ... and to be a part of such distinguished company makes me incredibly proud of the work we did to help bring 'Mulan's' world to the screen."

Baumgarten adds, "To be joining those who have received this award in previous years, I am incredibly honored to be recognized at SBIFF with the Variety Artisans Award for editing."



ALEXANDRA BYRNE

Byrne has six Oscar nominations and one win for her work on 2008's "Elizabeth: The Golden Age." She delivered a fresh take on the Regency era in dressing Autumn de Wilde's "Emma," a remake of the Jane Austen classic, by designing gowns with happy pastels and mixing colors such as maroons and yellows while staying authentic to the silhouette of the period. She used mint green and pale pink, as well as yellow and burnt orange to illustrate Emma's cool and breezy attitude. "I worked closely with Autumn to develop a palette of colors for every season," Byrne says. She leaned on white muslin for her designs, but she stresses the costumes were never meant to be just white; the sheerness of the fabric allowed her to layer other items on top to create a depth and richness that contrasted with the lightness and buoyancy.



DONALD GRAHAM BURT, JAN PASCALE

Production designer Burt teamed with set decorator Pascale to transform contemporary locations into the Golden Age of Hollywood — in black and white — for David Fincher's "Mank," which follows Herman Mankiewicz as he writes the script for "Citizen Kane." Burt and Pascale took audiences through the 1930s soundstages, mansions and nightclubs of Hollywood, and also William Randolph Hearst's storied Hearst Castle in San Simeon, Calif. "The whole approach to San Simeon was that we could never replicate it," Burt says. "But that's not what we wanted to do. We wanted to present something that told the story of being in this opulent, indulgent architectural space, and incorporate some of the details and some of the language from the original into it, knowing that we couldn't possibly go fully extravagant. It was about emulating instead of replicating." Burt and Pascale share an Oscar nomination for "Mank."



SEAN FADEN

Visual-effects supervisor Faden spent three years contributing to Disney's "Mulan." Faden, along with the team at Weta Digital, helped transform Gong Li into a witch and built some of the location shots for the film's Imperial City. During prep, he also worked on key sequences for Disney's live-action "Lady and the Tramp."



MIA NEAL

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" hair department head Neal made history by becoming the first Black Oscar nominee in the category along with Jamika Wilson, hairstylist to the film's star Viola Davis. The pic required Neal and the team to create by hand 100 wigs for the fateful recording session at the heart of the drama. "Use your skills together because this business can be unforgiving," she says. "If you take on more than you can handle, you don't get a second chance. Work on your skills and nothing is beneath you. A lot of people start in theater. Not just Broadway, but Off Broadway, opera and summer stock theater. You get the wig experience, you get to work on people's hair and you get the period experience. By the time you reach film, there's nothing that people throw your way that you can't handle."



LESLIE ODOM JR. AND SAM ASHWORTH

Grammy- and Tony Award-winner Odom not only scored a supporting actor Oscar nom for his role as Sam Cooke in Regina King's "One Night in Miami" but also one for original song. Music supervisor Randall Poster called on songwriter Sam Ashworth to co-write "Speak Now," which plays over "Miami's" end credits. The two had collaborated before on Odom's 2019 album "Mr."



↑
Mia Neal made history with her nomination for hair for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

“

We were looking for something interesting and would feel if it were in 1940, would be an experimental approach to how it would sound.”
—Trent Reznor



TRENT REZNOR AND ATTICUS ROSS

Composers Reznor and Ross will be honored for their work in two films, Netflix's "Mank" and Pixar's "Soul," for which they received an Oscar nomination. Reznor and Ross are no strangers when it comes to collaborating with David Fincher. The Nine Inch Nails duo have worked on the scores for "Gone Girl" and "The Social Network." Reznor says when he first heard the details, both he and Ross were intimidated, as usual. "But, I think any good project starts with a level of discomfort." He adds, "We were looking for something interesting and would feel if it were in 1940, would be an experimental approach to how it would sound." The two won an Academy Award for their work on "The Social Network." Last year, the duo won an Emmy Award for scoring HBO's "Watchmen."



JOSHUA JAMES RICHARDS

Cinematographer Richards will be recognized for Searchlight's "Nomadland" — his third collaboration with Chloe Zhao after "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" and "The Rider." For "Nomadland," Richards was inspired by America's vast vistas as he and Zhao drove across the country during their prep process, and worked to capture the right light and deliver Zhao's vision for the film. Next up, both are reunited for "Eternals."



Virtual Tricks of the Trade

The evolution of the LED wall pushes filmmaking into new realms • *Jazz Tangcay*

Back in 2001, Peter Jackson's "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring" put the technique of virtual production — with huge sequences shot on a motion-capture set — on the map. James Cameron took it one step further with 2009's "Avatar." Through the years, visual-effects houses have worked to further develop the technology; now, LED technology in a virtual production context allows filmmakers even more freedom in creating immersive worlds.

"The Mandalorian" may not be the first production to use this technique, but has become famous for it.

Industrial Light and Magic used the Unreal Game engine from Epic Games to create StageCraft, a 20-foot-high by 75-foot-wide and 270-degree-semicircle of LED video walls.

With a better understanding of creator Jon Favreau's vision for "The Mandalorian" Season 2, the ILM team worked on re-architecting the technology.

"We made it larger and higher so we could accommodate more complex action as well as multiple shooting cameras," says ILM's Greg Grusby. "We also replaced the LED panels with substantially higher resolution and more color-accurate units on the walls and the ceiling."

The goal of "The Midnight Sky's" visual-effects supervisors Matt Kasmir and Chris Lawrence was to immerse director-star George Clooney and audiences into the film's world seamlessly.

"We wanted to utilize [the LED wall] because it seemed like a fantastic production choice," Kasmir says.

The team at ILM showed Kasmir around the wall, and after seeing what it could do, he opted for that technology on Clooney's space drama.

"I was discussing it with our production designer Jim Bissell, and he had created this set with a huge aspect window. Everything on the set was reflective. The thought of hanging

a blue screen or a green screen seemed sacrilegious."

Using that technology would also remove the color information that was on the set. LED screens seemed to fit their vision.

Lawrence says Clooney's philosophy was "technology was OK as long as it didn't get in the way." He adds the decision to use LED screens would "provide context for the cast and filmmakers because they could see what was going on."

The LED walls allow department heads to work together to capture the complete shot, in-camera, allowing for all the work to come together on the day.

↑
"Midnight Sky" starring Kyle Chandler used an LED wall with a huge aspect window to great effect.

“

We wanted to utilize the [LED wall] because it seemed like a fantastic production choice.” — Matt Kasmir

“With a bluescreen set, oftentimes the background will be added long after a production designer has moved onto their next show, and the VFX team is trying to imagine what the art department might have designed,” Grusby says.

While many productions have embraced the technology and virtual production has become essential for many during the pandemic — it’s rumored that “Star Trek Discovery,” which filmed Season 4 in Toronto, will make use of it — others have been a bit reluctant to jump on the bandwagon.

Visual-effects supervisor Sean Faden says there are different levels in which filmmakers can choose to implement the technology.

“This can be as simple as an AR iPad walking through a virtual set, or something as complex as real camera rigs ‘filming’ virtual characters as done in ‘The One and Only Ivan.’”

The lesser commitment, he suggests would be simply using the screens for interactive lighting only — “such as using it for car comps to create more realistic reflections on the car’s chromes.”

As the tools become more accessible, it’s simply down to the filmmaker and how much they want to commit to using it.

Of course, the biggest advantage to using LED walls is the impact this tech has on not only enhancing the creative flow and keeping production going in the race back from the pandemic, but also with reducing the need for costly location shoots, sets and large crowd scenes.

However, its biggest advantage to productions everywhere is how much it helps to reduce the shoot’s carbon footprint.

Grusby points out: “On ‘The Mandalorian,’ it allowed the production to reduce set construction and relocation costs, and to cut down on carbon emissions by 30 tons — the equivalent of 39 acres of trees for a year. The production was also able to reduce the usage of materials such as foam and Luan [plywood] allowing them to be friendlier to the environment.”



“The Mandalorian” drew the most noms at the VES Awards.

‘Mandalorian’ Dominates VES Noms

Disney Plus series grabs 13, while ‘Soul’ nabs five • By Jazz Tangcay

The “Mandalorian” and “Soul” lead the pack with most nominations for the 19th Annual Visual Effects Society Awards.

“The Mandalorian” snagged 13 nominations, including outstanding visual effects in a photoreal episode. “Soul” was next with five nominations, followed by “The Witches” and “Project Power.”

The VES awards will be handed out in a virtual ceremony and stream worldwide on April 6.

“Traditions find a way to persist,” says Lisa Cooke, VES board chair. “With vision and a lot of hard work, we are proud to host our annual celebration of the artistry, ingenuity and passion of visual-effects practitioners around the world — virtually. We are seeing best in

class work that elevates the art of storytelling and engages the audience in new and innovative ways. The VES Awards is the only venue that showcases and honors these outstanding artists across a wide range of disciplines, and we are extremely proud of all our nominees.”

Select nominees are listed below. For the full list of nominees, see visualeffects-society.com.

VISUAL EFFECTS IN A PHOTO-REAL EPISODE

Lovecraft Country; “Jig-a-Bobo”

Kevin Blank
Robin Griffin
Pietro Ponti
Francois Dumoulin

Star Trek: Discovery; “Su’Kai”

Jason Michael
Zimmerman
Aleksandra Kochoska
Ante Dekovic
Ivan Kondrup Jensen

The Mandalorian; “The Marshal”

Joe Bauer
Abigail Keller
Hal Hickel
Richard Bluff
Roy Cancino

Timmy Failure

Rich McBride
Leslie Lerman
Nicolas Chevallier
Anders Beer
Tony Lazarowich

Westworld; “Crisis Theory”

Jay Worth
Elizabeth Castro
Bruce Branit
Joe Wehmeyer
Mark Byers

SUPPORTING VISUAL EFFECTS IN A PHOTOREAL EPISODE

I Know This Much Is True; Episode 1

Eric Pascarella
Keith Kolder
Ariel Altman

Mrs. America; “Shirley”

Janelle Croshaw
Kaylie Whitcher
Leonardo Silva
Zena Bielewicz
Michael Innanen

Survive

Ariel Altman
Rae Welty
Caius Wong
Carl Fong

The Crown; “Gold Stick”

Ben Turner
Reece Ewing
Andrew Scrase

Vikings; “Best Laid Plans”

Jonathan Wood
Dominic Remane
Bill Halliday

Westworld; “Crisis Theory”

Tom Morrison
Ovidiu Cinazan
Paul Byrne

Warrior; “Learn to Endure, or Hire a Bodyguard”

Jonathan Alenskas Leah Orsini Nate Overstrom David Eschrich

VISUAL EFFECTS IN AN ANIMATED FEATURE

Onward

Dan Scanlon
Kori Rae
Sanjay Bakshi
Vincent Serritella

Over the Moon

Glen Keane
Gennie Rim
Céline Desrumaux
David Alexander Smith

Soul

Pete Docter
Dana Murray
Michael Fong
Bill Wattal

The Croods: A New Age

Joel Crawford
Mark Swift, PGA
Betsy Nofsinger
Jakob Hjort Jensen

Trolls World Tour

Walt Dohrn
Gina Shay
Kendal Cronkhite-Shaindlin
Matt Baer

Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey

Brad Parker
Roma Van Den Bergh
Eric Guaglione
Carlos Monzon

Project Power

Ivan Moran
Leslie Hough
Joao Sita
Matthew Twyford

Tenet

Andrew Jackson
Mike Chambers
Andrew Lockley
David Lee

The Midnight Sky

Matt Kasmir
Greg Baxter
Chris Lawrence
Max Solomon
David Watkins

The Witches

Kevin Baillie
Sandra Scott
Sean Konrad
Glenn Melenhorst
Mark Holt

SUPPORTING VISUAL EFFECTS IN A PHOTOREAL FEATURE

Da 5 Bloods
Randall Balsmeyer
James Cooper
Watcharachai “Sam” Panichsuk

Extraction

Marko Forker
Lynzi Grant
Craig Wentworth
Olivier Sarda

Mank

Wei Zheng
Peter Mavromates
Simon Carr
James Pastorius

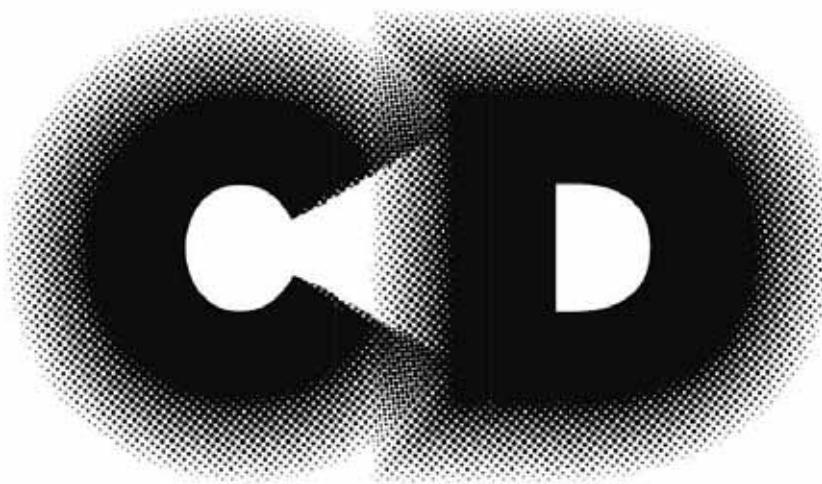
News of the World

Roni Rodriguez
Dayaliyah Lopez
Ian Fellows
Andrew Morley
Brandon K. McLaughlin

Welcome to Chechnya

Ryan Laney
Eugen Bräunig
Maxwell Anderson
Johnny Han
Piers Dennis





CENTER DINNER

THURSDAY
APRIL 15
2 0 2 1

Thursday, April 15, 2021 | 6:30 p.m. ET

Join The Center as we celebrate the LGBTQ community and those making an impact at our virtual Center Dinner.

RSVP for free at gaycenter.org/centerdinner.

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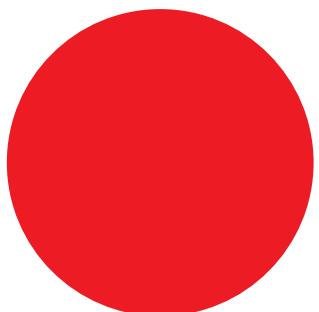
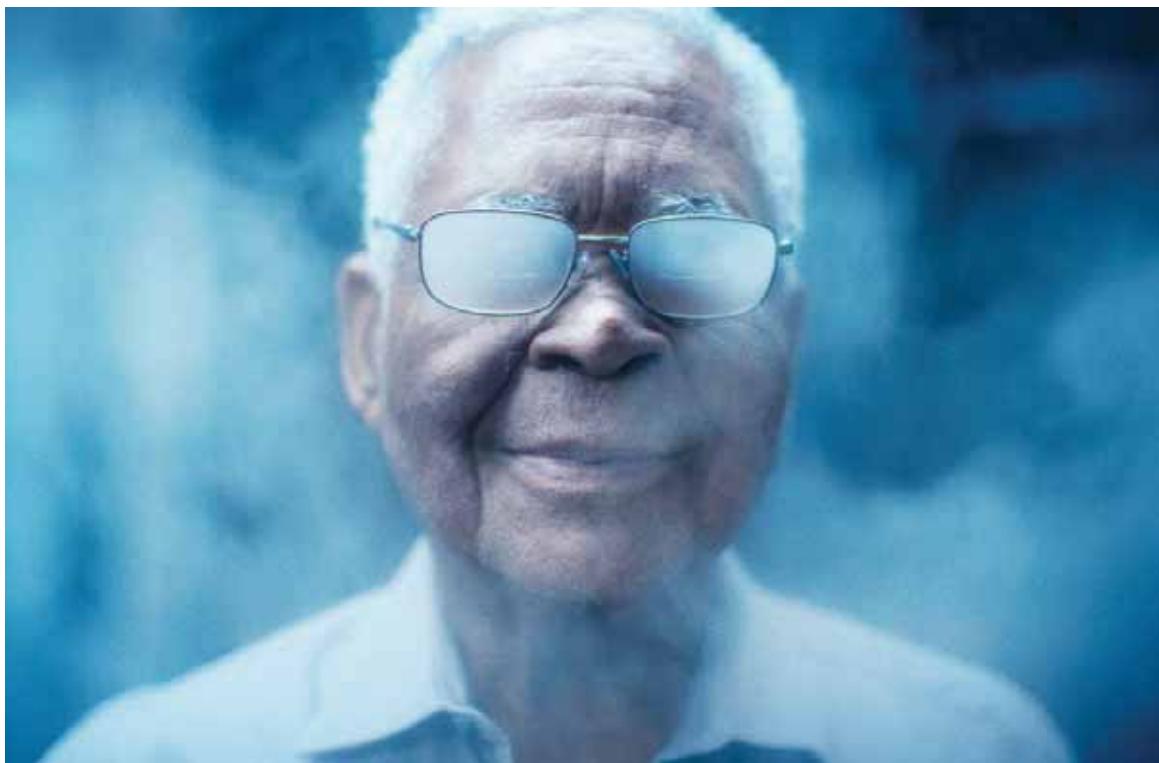
ARTISANS

'A Concerto Is a Conversation' Tells a Personal Story

The Oscar-nominated short bears the fruit of a family tree

"A Concerto Is a Conversation" focuses on the bond between composer Kris Bowers and his grandfather Horace Bowers Sr. (below).

By Jazz Tangcay



Oscar-nominated short film "A Concerto Is a Conversation" is the story of love between a grandfather and his grandson woven together through music. It's also a narrative about race in America.

Composer Kris Bowers, the virtuoso behind "Green Book" and "When They See Us," wears multiple hats for the film, as co-director (with friend Ben Proudfoot), producer, composer and star. He appears alongside his 91-year-old grandfather Horace Bowers Sr.

The 13-minute film is the result of a short piece Proudfoot had been working on for L.A. Film School, which had commissioned him for a project addressing the intersection between Los Angeles and music. He reached out to Bowers after learning



**27TH ANNUAL
SCREEN ACTORS
GUILD AWARDS**

SUNDAY 9ET/6PT



SAG-AFTRA

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“

It was easiest in the moments where I was focused on my grandfather.”

— Kris Bowers

the composer was set to appear at Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles for a violin concerto with the American Youth Symphony. “He asked if he could follow me writing that piece,” Bowers remembers.

The day the two got together to trade ideas for the project, Bowers showed up in a suit. Asked about his attire, Bowers explained that he had just come from a ceremony for his grandfather, who owns a dry-cleaning shop on Central Avenue in Los Angeles. The elder Bowers had had the business area around the shop named in his honor.

Proudfoot’s film began to take a different turn as he heard Bowers share his grandfather’s history: He had come from the Florida panhandle town of Bascom, and after experiencing the Jim Crow South, had moved cross country.

The documentary starts with Bowers prepping for the concerto before cutting to Bowers Sr. asking his grandson, “What’s a concerto?” and later, “Did you ever picture yourself doing what you’re

doing now?” The conversation then segues into Bowers Sr. recalling his journey.

Cinematographers David Bolen and Brandon Somerhalder had 700 pounds of camera gear between them to capture the exchange, but Proudfoot explains that the setup was an intimate one. “We are tight in on them,” he says. “Both Kris and his grandfather were inches of minimal focal distance from these lenses.” It was a choice Proudfoot says he has honed over 45 projects, for which he often chooses tight shots to show the nuances in his subjects’ faces. “It’s this beautiful result of being able to have this quiet and intimate thing so you can analyze every nook and cranny. You can analyze every word through their storytelling.”

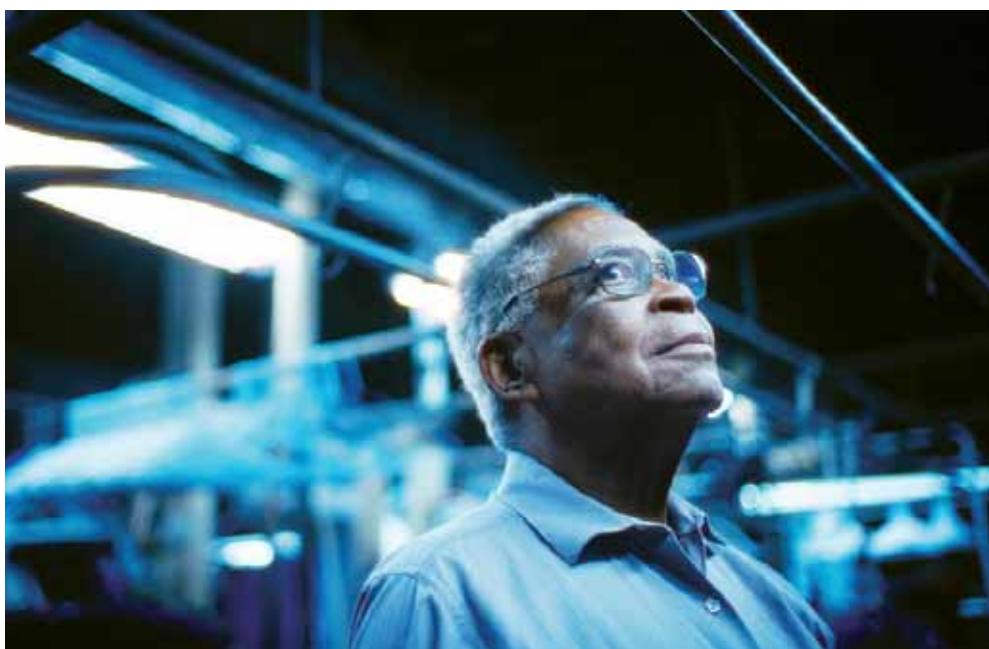
It was up to editor Lukas Dong to thread the multiple storylines together — Bowers’ as he’s writing his concerto, the conversation about his grandfather’s history and the theme of race. Proudfoot says, “We went through many cuts of this film.”

One sequence shows Bowers Sr.’s foot on the pedal of a steamer at the laundry and cuts to Bowers’ foot on the pedal of a Steinway piano. “There’s so much tying them together through time and physicality, so it’s one foot pressing both pedals,” explains Proudfoot. (Serendipitously, Bowers recorded the piece on the piano that John Williams used to compose the theme to *Jurassic Park*.)

One piece that was particularly meaningful to Bowers was a variation on the hymn “How Great Thou Art,” which Bowers Sr. sings at the end. “That appears twice,” says the composer. “It’s a thankful moment that reminds me of [being in] church.”

While Bowers had to write the score based on his concerto and craft the music to fit the story of his life, he says that talking with the elder Bowers and discussing his history made him feel freer when considering aspects of his own work.

“It was easiest in the moments where I was focused on my grandfather,” notes Bowers, “because I could see him as a hero.”



Horace Bowers Sr. surveys the dry-cleaning business he established after moving from Florida to Los Angeles in the '40s.

Designer Crafts New Terror for Horror Fans

By Jazz Tangcay



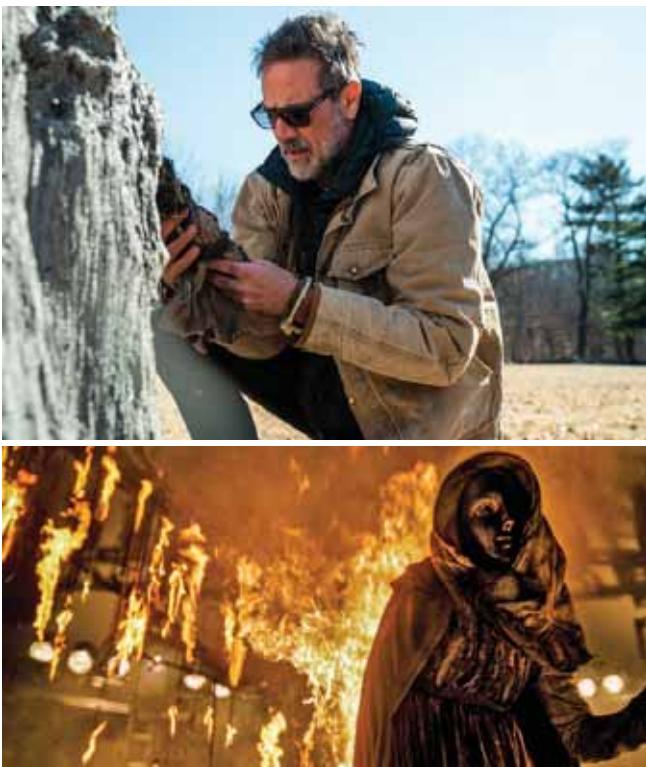
The kern dolls in Sony Pictures’ *“The Unholy”* might very well join the realm of creepiest movie dolls when the movie is released in theaters on Good Friday, April 2. It was production designer Felicity Abbott’s job to fashion the doll, part of a Scottish tradition among Celtic farmers who would bury the totems at the end of their fields to bring good luck.

The idea, says director Evan Spiliotopoulos, was “that the dolls would absorb all the negative energy in the field, and everything would be cleansed.” The film is an adaptation of James Herbert’s 1983 horror novel *“Shrine,”* about a tree with magical powers that cures people. The book incorporated a supernatural element into the Scottish custom, focusing on a deaf and mute girl who can hear and speak after visiting the tree.

In the film, Spiliotopoulos relocated the setting from the U.K. to Massachusetts. Jeffrey Dean Morgan plays Gerry Fern, a struggling journalist who travels to the small town of Banfield for a story. While there, he discovers a kern doll buried within a petrified oak tree. The doll is wrapped and chained with an impossible date of Feb. 31, 1845, engraved into a metal tag. The date connects to a tombstone in South Carolina on a witch’s grave. “The reasoning,” Spiliotopoulos explains, “was when you put an impossible date on the tomb of an evil thing, that thing cannot come back because that date will never come to pass.”

Desperate for a news story, Fern breaks the doll to “free the spirit.” Not long after, Alice, played by Cricket Brown, is able to hear after a “miraculous visit” from the Virgin Mary. Is it a miracle or something far more sinister?

Though typical kern dolls were woven from corn or wheat stalks, Abbott referenced Queen Anne dolls, with elongated faces and bright rosy cheeks, which were in fashion in England in the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. “Ours had to be cracked,” she says, “because the script required that. It had



From top: Jeffrey Dean Morgan stars in "The Unholy"; a statue of the Virgin Mary was a key film prop.

a porcelain head, hands, and feet, with a wooden pegged body because certain things needed to be carved into the body."

The production designer went through four iterations of the figurine during the concept stage before settling on the final scale — close to the size of a real infant that could be cradled. The idea was to speak to the history of the creepy dolls of cinema, referencing Annabelle from "The Conjuring" franchise, "Chucky" and a number of scary ventriloquist dolls. "The Unholy" used 10 heads and bodies, which were interchanged according to what was happening in the storyline.

The dolls weren't the only thing designed to terrorize audiences. Abbott and set decorator Michael C. Stone transformed a nondenominational church in

Sudbury into a Catholic church, which plays a central part in the film's supernatural story, with religious themes, including a statue of the Virgin Mary that proves mutable to magic.

Further complicating the process was the pandemic, which forced a shutdown just four weeks into filming on March 16.

"When we came back after shutdown in September, shipping wasn't easy. Things didn't arrive, and it became complicated," Stone says. One of the missing items: the statue of the Virgin Mary. But Stone persevered. "I eventually found a gentleman in Pennsylvania who had collected thousands of statues of the Virgin Mary," he says.

Spiliotopoulos says he ultimately had his pick of eight Virgin Marys in order to "cast" just the right one. ☀

“

WHEN WE CAME BACK AFTER SHUTDOWN IN SEPTEMBER, SHIPPING WASN'T EASY. THINGS DIDN'T ARRIVE, AND IT BECAME COMPLICATED.”
— MICHAEL C. STONE, SET DECORATOR

Tapping Into Nostalgia for '8-Bit Memories'

By Jazz Tangcay



Earlier this year, South London musician DWY (pronounced "Dewey") released a concept album called "8-Bit Memories." The tracks varied from "Black Boy," an observation of society, to "Summers Over," a song about growing up.

Now the singer-songwriter has a short film, titled after the album, which producer RadicalMedia is planning to take on the festival circuit. The script was born out of his desire to make something different from a music video and to connect to the album's idea of a time remembered more than experienced. His creative partner Jesse Rose suggested a movie. "I was a 'Pokémon' fan, and the graphics were awful," DWY says, "but there's this nostalgic 8-bit connection to it that's fuzzy, and that was the crux of the title."

Cinematographer Peter Soto and director Quran Squire sat with the musician and decided the 15-minute film should have a gritty fantastical feel with magical realism added to reflect the idea of a bygone era. "Sixteen-millimeter film was the way to capture that," Squire says. The story follows a young man trying to make something of himself in a relentless world. One night his girlfriend Mia, played by Cadienne Obeng, decides they might not be made for each other after all.

Singer-songwriter DWY in the gritty "8-Bit Memories," produced alongside his concept album



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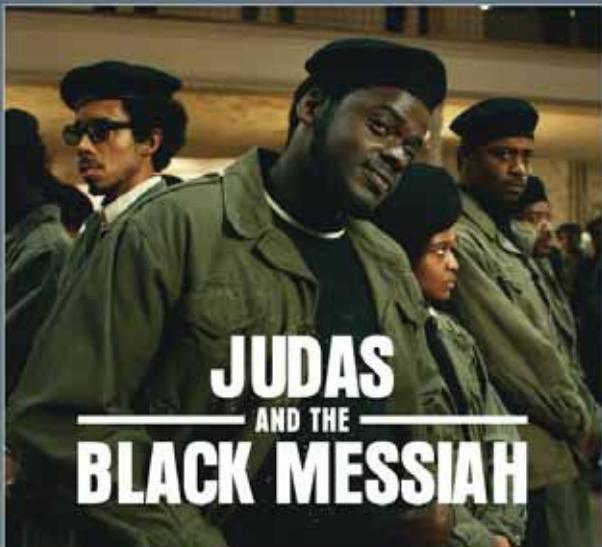
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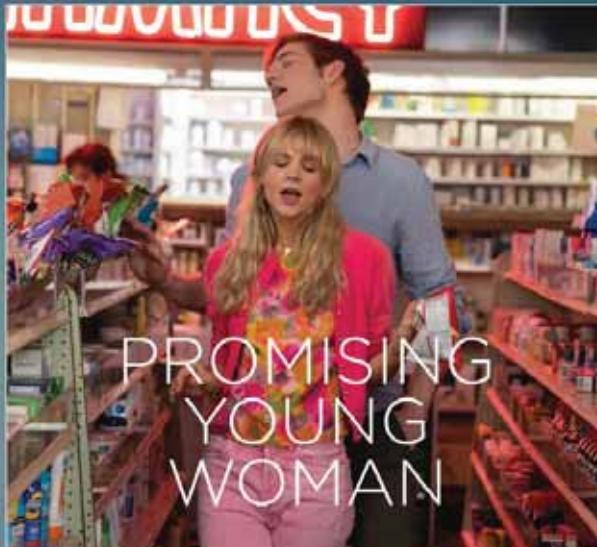
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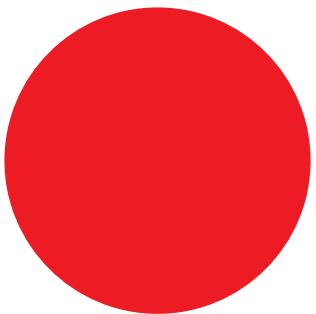
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REVIEWS

Godzilla vs. Kong

By Peter Debruge

Mutant meets mammal in "Godzilla vs. Kong."



FILM REVIEW

Director: Adam Wingard

With: Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, Rebecca Hall

It's all been leading up to this: the ultimate monster mash — or clash of the titans — "Godzilla vs. Kong."

Enticing as an epic slugfest between two of cinema's most famous demolition experts may sound, there's really no way to pretend that King of the Monsters and once-and-future-king Kong are evenly matched. Godzilla has missile-proof skin and atomic breath, while his primate adversary is essentially a big gorilla. Unlike the all-but-indestructible Godzilla, Kong can feel, bleed and be easily sedated. These two aren't even supposed to be the same size, although the movie presents them as such — but then, scale has rarely been a sticking point in a series that once saw a man in a rubber suit stomping through 6-foot power lines.

The way director Adam Wingard ("You're Next") figures it, if you have time to think about such things during "Godzilla vs. Kong," he's not doing his job correctly. The director intends for you to be impressed, but also to care about these nonspeaking characters (but especially Kong, the obvious underdog here). Meanwhile, the human ensemble is made up mostly of conspiracy quacks and pseudoscience hacks, which may resonate in a world spun by QAnon-sense. Eyes wide, brains off, ears bleeding — that's how Wingard wants his audience.

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“

Not even the coronavirus can stop these two magnificent beasts from wreaking beautiful mayhem, resulting in some of the most photo-genic destruction this side of Michael Bay.”

When Toho Studios unleashed Godzilla on the world in 1954, the ragging kaiju spawned sequel upon sequel across several different cycles, as the giant lizard attacked first cities and then other mutant creatures in a succession of showdowns having little consistency to the overarching mythology. Working with Warner Bros., Legendary has been more strategic in laying the groundwork for its so-called MonsterVerse, releasing a Kong reboot (“Skull Island”) with the express intent of pitting the ape against Godzilla in a future blockbuster.

Now, not even the coronavirus can stop these two magnificent beasts from wreaking beautiful mayhem, resulting in some of the most photogenic destruction this side of Michael Bay. Whether it’s staging a rumpus on the high seas or a donnybrook in downtown Hong Kong, Wingard has the vision to deliver iconic fight scenes in a movie with multiple surprises up its sleeve (including another classic opponent to unite the rivals), while mercifully clocking in at under two hours.

The movie opens on Skull Island, where Kong is being kept contained by Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall). The enormous brute has all but adopted a deaf girl, Jia (Kaylee Hottle); that and his evolving use of tools indicate more smarts than

his captors realized. Halfway around the world, crackpot podcaster Bernie Hayes (Brian Tyree Henry) promises to expose shady secrets at Apex Industries just as Godzilla makes his first appearance, rising from the sea to attack the robotics research facility.

What’s not clear about the incident is whether the rest of civilization has anything to fear from Godzilla, who seems to have a special beef with Apex boss Walter Simmons (Demián Bichir). In Godzilla’s prior appearance, 2019’s loud and overcrowded “King of the Monsters,” the lizard served as a positive force of supernatural pest control, ridding the planet of unwanted predators. But Walter doesn’t see it that way. Humans aren’t comfortable anywhere but the top of the food chain, and Apex intends to live up to its name.

Clearly, Walter’s plan is to build something more powerful. To pull that off, he enlists nut-job professor Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård), a champion of the Hollow Earth theory that dinosaurs didn’t go extinct — they just went underground. Their cuckoo mission to reach the Earth’s core requires shipping Kong to Antarctica, where he can lead them to this subterranean realm and what Ilene describes as “a power beyond our understanding.”

That’s more than enough plot for one movie, especially since audiences didn’t sign up for a Jules Verne adventure but a tooth-and-claw brawl.

From the filmmakers’ point of view, the idea is to get Kong out on the open ocean, chained to a heavily armed carrier, so that he and Godzilla can ring in their first round. In this setting, the helmer has 360-degree access to his combatants, who obediently pose for his dynamic virtual cameras. If “Cloverfield” was the shaky, mock-doc answer to a kaiju movie, then “Godzilla vs. Kong” is its glossy, gleefully artificial antithesis: a beastly battle royal where nearly every shot looks mythic.

Screenwriters Eric Pearson and Max Borenstein have a way of complicating things with twists that barely hold water — including “Stranger Things” actor Millie Bobby Brown’s “Stranger Things”-like bunker break-in. “Godzilla vs. Kong” is most satisfying when it’s at its simplest, which happens either in quiet bonding scenes between Jia and Kong, or else in those deafening moments when the monsters are duking it out.

They do in a Zack Snyder-esque suspended-animation way, so that fans probably don’t even consciously realize the filmmaker is dialing down the frame



↑
**Julian Dennison,
 Millie Bobby
 Brown and Brian
 Tyree Henry
 provide the
 slugfest's human
 dimension.**

rate to accentuate their most dramatic moves. Back in the day, these franchises relied on endearingly clunky practical effects, using stop-motion and rubber suits to bring the creatures to life. By contrast, this entry amounts to a high-end cartoon, in which computer-generated characters pummel each other on virtual sets.

While stunning, the footage has that hyperreal-to-the-point-of-fake look, where everything is either moodily twilit or smothered in magic-hour honey. Granted, that’s an improvement over both Godzilla’s and Kong’s hokey lo-fi origins. Just because Warner Bros. is treating the adversaries as bona fide A-listers doesn’t mean the rock-’em-sock-’em extravaganza amounts to anything more than a dumb-fun B-movie. Nor should it. Considering the havoc a microscopic virus has wreaked on the past year, being caught between two 200-foot titans doesn’t seem so bad. 

CREDITS: A Warner Bros. Pictures release, presented with Legendary Pictures, a Legendary Pictures production. **Producers:** Mary Parent, Alex Garcia, Eric McLeod, Jon Jashni, Thomas Tull, Brian Rogers. **Executive producers:** Jay Ashenfelter, Herbert W. Gains, Dan Lin, Roy Lee, Yoshimitsu Banno, Kenji Okuhira. **Director:** Adam Wingard. **Screenplay:** Eric Pearson, Max Borenstein; **story:** Terry Rossio, Michael Dougherty & Zach Shields, based on the character “Godzilla,” owned and created by Toho Co. **Camera:** Ben Seresin. **Editor:** Josh Schaeffer. **Music:** Tom Holkenborg. Reviewed at Imax Headquarters, Playa Vista, March 24, 2021. **MPAA Rating:** PG-13. **Running time:** 113 MIN. **Cast:** Alexander Skarsgård, Millie Bobby Brown, Rebecca Hall, Brian Tyree Henry, Shun Oguri, Ezra González, Julian Dennison, Kyle Chandler, Demián Bichir, Kaylee Hottle

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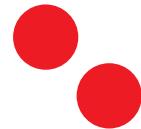
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The Serpent

By Daniel D'Addario



TV REVIEW

True Crime: Netflix (8 episodes; all reviewed); April 2

Starring: Tahar Rahim, Jenna Coleman

The case of Charles Sobhraj seems perfect for the age of the true-crime dramatization. Sobhraj, currently incarcerated in Nepal, was a serial murderer in the 1970s, preying especially upon Western travelers on the so-called Hippie Trail in Asia. His notoriety intersects with the anxieties of his era, and his deeds demonstrate an almost boundless capacity for cruelty and compartmentalization: Both of these facts would seem to serve a genre that seeks within stories from the past ways of understanding our times and ourselves.

"The Serpent," a limited series appearing on Netflix after running on BBC One earlier this year, unfortunately never gets there. Through the writing of Richard Warlow and Toby Finlay, we are given an intriguing — if at times somewhat generic-feeling — look into the world of seekers and believers trying to find themselves between Kathmandu and Bangkok, and we see that world preyed on by an archvillain whose skillfulness has its pleasures but whose soul remains obscured. "The Serpent," true to its title, treats Sobhraj as something more dangerous and otherwise less than human, but in doing so, it leaves the possibility of real insight behind.

One issue is the scrambled timeline, which slices between Sobhraj's crimes and the effort to stop him. Intercutting between crime and punishment — with frequent on-screen legends telling us how many months or years have elapsed — makes an eight-hour series feel longer and diminishes the volume of story that it's working with. The technique reduces practically every incident into a vignette and cuts short the amount of sustained time we spend in the presence of Sobhraj.

→
Jenna Coleman and Tahar Rahim star in "The Serpent."



(played by Tahar Rahim). His crimes begin to seem formulaic, which is true of a serial killer, perhaps. But Sobhraj's ennui becomes our own, sapping the series of a raw tension that should be the first thing it gets right. Directors Tom Shankland and Hans Herbots have conjured atmosphere only to let it slip away. The tendency of "The Serpent" to slither from point to point without letting us get situated feels not so much artful as the case of a show that is not confident about the power and potency of its material.

The actors work hard to convince us of the story's worth. As Sobhraj, Rahim is very fine: Recently the lead in the film "The Mauritanian," he is an insinuating presence, lending enough oleaginous charm to his character to make clear why his victims were taken in. Sobhraj often appeared first to his quarries as a helper or a savior figure, providing them assistance or offering them the chance to share in profits from gems he hoped to offload. Rahim is an effective master of disguise — he shifts his look to evade detection, and in what is both a suitable metaphor for his constant morphing and a satisfying process to watch, doctors passports with ease. But his best costume

is the pretense of decency. When the mask falls — as, for instance, when he turns on one of his closest associates (Amesh Edireweera) — it's terrifying.

As his girlfriend Marie-Andrée Leclerc, Jenna Coleman gives the series' best and longest look at the sort of person swept into Sobhraj's orbit, ensorcelled by his air of confidence and of wealth but allowed to live, by some good fortune or by Sobhraj sensing that her amorality comes in a shape similar to his. One of the show's few genuinely amusing uses of its intercutting is holding on her face as she swears off being Sobhraj's "accomplice" — cut to three months later, and she's grinning by the pool, buoyed by his wealth and the Bonnie-and-Clyde adventurism of being a pair against the world.

But what were Sobhraj and Leclerc against? In its consideration of a criminal whose vicious imagination lacks a clear origin, the show faces a challenge similar to Ryan Murphy's 2018 limited series about Andrew Cunanan. Here, it's all demonstration, little explanation: We get a crystalline sense of Sobhraj's distaste for the hippie lifestyle, rendering aesthetic judgments through death. But

he also appears to disdain the bourgeoisie — we get glimpses, more substantial as the show progresses, into the family life that may have fueled the early stages of Sobhraj's rage, with the criminal telling a pious family member "I'm smarter than Christ." His nihilism makes for an intriguing enough case study for a while, and an interesting counterpoint to the do-gooders trying to stop him (including his neighbors, played by Mathilde Warnier and Grégoire Isvarine, and a pair of husband-wife diplomats, played by Billy Howle and Ellie Bamber).

But if it doesn't need to explain, "The Serpent" needs to do more to draw us in. As it becomes evident that fundamental questions about Sobhraj's temperament and decision-making are beyond this series' grasp, the temporal leaps start to seem like distraction more than edification. Sobhraj is, by the end, an ably played monster who did things at a certain time, with neither man nor time convincingly explored beyond depiction. 

CREDITS: Executive producers: Richard Warlow, Tom Shankland, Preethi Mavahalli, Damien Timmer. 60 MIN. **Cast:** Tahar Rahim, Jenna Coleman, Billy Howle, Ellie Bamber, Amesh Edireweera, Tim McInnerny, Mathilde Warnier, Grégoire Isvarine

Nasim Pedrad

"There was such a razor-thin line between me looking like a little boy or just looking like Kris Jenner."

By Danielle Turchiano



Nasim Pedrad on set as the title character in "Chad."

Half a decade ago, not long after Nasim Pedrad left the "Saturday Night Live" ensemble, she came up with the idea for "Chad," a sitcom centering on an awkward teenage boy who just desperately wants to fit in. After first being developed for broadcast television, "Chad" found a home at WarnerMedia cabler TBS and is finally premiering on April 6. Pedrad not only created the show but also serves as showrunner and star, donning a wig, fake eyebrows and a

binder to portray the titular high school freshman.

→ **What inspired you to write "Chad" from the point of view of a teenage boy, as opposed to a younger version of yourself?** I love writing about the awkwardness of adolescence, and I really wanted to write something that felt authentic to my own experience growing up as an immigrant kid in America. So it started there, and this was five years ago,

[so] I hadn't ever seen a coming-of-age story where the teenager at the center of it was played by an adult who's in on the joke. I thought it would push the comedy so much further. And honestly, I just really felt like I could disappear into looking like a little dude.

→ **Some elements of adolescence are not gender-specific; how much did you find you could still pull from your own younger years for the character?**

Things you didn't know about Nasim Pedrad

←
Age: 39

Hometown: Tehran

Mood music: "Chad is a big Drake fan, so I had these hip-hop workout playlists that I listened to when I was trying to get pumped up because it was pretty much what Chad would listen to."

Cause she most cares about: Center for Human Rights — "They focus on violations happening in Iran today, and obviously that's very personal to me."

Role she's most recognized for: Aly on "New Girl"

I know this might sound disarming to hear because I was not ever a 14-year-old boy, but Chad does feel more like me than not me. Every corner of this character reminds me of myself at that age — certainly the desire to fit in and the paralyzing fear of being different. I was caught between these two cultures: My parents were Persian, but I very much wanted to assimilate and feel like I belonged in America. And it's already terrifying enough to be a teenager when you're just wanting to not feel different than your peers, but when you're an immigrant kid there's almost this extra layer to get through to fit in. Chad navigating high school was a lot like [me] in that regard.

→ **What made you want to set this as a modern-day show?** I thought it'd be more interesting to say, "Well, what if [he] went to school with kids who are somewhat woke and not interested in bullying him but just didn't even notice him?" Chad can't get anyone to pay attention to him. That's its own challenge. And to me, it just felt like a fresher take on a familiar template for a show.

→ **What inspired the look for Chad and the specific choice of wig?** Chad is physically a blend of all 10 of my male cousins. The wig was an interesting exploration because we tried on so many different wigs and there was such a razor-thin line between me looking like a little boy or just looking like Kris Jenner. The eyebrows also really helped physically make any trace of femininity disappear.

→ **Since the show has had such a long gestation period, what adjustments did you make for how the world has changed?** Whether it's conversations surrounding toxic masculinity or trying to stay current with what teenagers are even just into and talk about today, it really felt important to me for the show to feel timely and current. And also, it was set up at a network and then ended up in cable, so there was a tonal shift there from a writing perspective. But the core character and the essence of Chad has remained consistent throughout. ↗

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